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"HOLD ON, THAR!" WAS THE SONOROUS INTONATION. "EZ I HAPPEN HYAR SO HANDY MEBBE WE'D BETTER MAKE IT A THREE-HANDED GAME."

Gold Trigger, the Sport;

OR,

THE GIRL AVENGERS.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "NICK O' THE NIGHT," "HIDDEN LODGE," "NIGHTINGALE NAT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"HILT OR POINT?"

PANTHER CITY was a flash town, but a place of considerable importance.

Situated amid the Far Northwest, where spring into life the head-waters of the Missouri, young though it was, it possessed a history which might have been traced by the flash of the deadly pistol and the gleam of the bowie.

On the death-infested borders of Indian-dom, it seemed shut off from civilization.

Panther City had been founded on a lie; a report that gold existed in fabulous quantities in the mountains, had called it into existence; shanties sprung up like mushrooms after a warm spring shower, and soon a thousand sun-burned adventurers began to prospect.

Now and then a nugget rewarded them; but the richest veins proved to be "chimneys," and the gold-hunters went back to Panther City to prey upon each other.

Three months after the building of the city, empty houses stood open everywhere; one year later but four hundred inhabitants remained. It is Panther City still, and the code of law in force there, is the work of the rope, the bowie and the trigger.

Now let us begin our story:

It was near the close of a bracing April day when a grotesque individual rode into the suburbs of Panther City.

He would have attracted attention anywhere, with his great rawboned figure, the unseen length of his legs, and his little head, towering on a cranelike neck far above a pair of mountainous shoulders. A suit "made to order" would hardly be expected to fit such a representation of humanity; his head hung loosely on his figure. His pantaloons were thrust into a pair of heavy boots, from the fronts of which some stockingless toes exhibited their uncleanness; his hair was shaggy and uncombed like the matted hide of the bear.

This man carried two visible weapons; a bone-handled bowie that stuck in his belt, and a well-used rifle which he carried carelessly across the saddle.

If he was an object to excite curiosity and derision, his horse was none the less so.

It was a bony little creature of mountain breed and scanty forage; and it was so low that the feet of its merciless rider almost touched the ground. Its hair was long and of a dirty sorrel; its tail was the abode of burrs and thistles; but it had a meek and patient light in its sleepy eyes.

On either hip of this northwestern Rosinante hung a placard made from dried buffalo-hide on which was traced this all important information:

"*This animile fur sail or trade!*"

As the stranger guided his horse down the main thoroughfare of Panther City, he cut a figure that would have called laughter from the most reserved.

Of course he could not escape observation for any length of time, and he soon found himself surrounded by one-half the population of the place.

"Hello, Bones! whar ar' ye goin' with thet graveyard?" was among the hundreds of questions that greeted him. "Ef you really want to get rid of yer crow meat jest keep on till ye strike Buzzard Gulch! By Jingo! you ought to be arrested ef you offer the buzzards such a desert as thet pyramid of bones ye'r' on."

The stranger listened to these taunting observations without a show of displeasure; he had struck a good-natured crowd, for remarks of the kind we have recorded kept it in a continual uproar.

"Yes, sir, fur sail or trade," he retorted at last, looking over the crowd. "Thar's a barg'in in the old hoss. He ain't none ov yer lightnin' flyers, er I'd 'a' called 'im Hurrycane; but he's gentle, doceel an' sure. So I call 'im Morpheen. Trot out yer stock, fetch on yer critters, an' when I leave this place you'll own a dose ov morpheen what 'll do yer very boot soles good! I'm Old Bizness, commonly Old Biz, fur short; I know more about hosses, Injuns and whisky poker than any man west of the Atlantic brine! This hoss is an animile of prominent p'int; he's sound as a dollar; never had a rib broken as ye kin see at a glance! He'll love ye at first sight, an' he kin smell grass and Injuns twenty miles off. Hold up your head, Morpheen! Thar! look at his mouth, gentlem'n; his age is in his favor; he has seen enough ov life to understand it. Why, you could l'arn this hoss to talk; an' he could tell you when these old mountains war put hyar. Yes, sir, his age is in his favor. Trot out yer stock, er giv' me an offer."

As the man finished, he threw his right leg over the horn of his saddle and faced the main portion of the crowd.

In order to afford some amusement for his friends, a young man stepped forward, and began to inspect the animal's mouth.

"How old is that geological specimen, anyhow?" came from the crowd.

A grin and a twinkle of the inspector's eye preceded the answer.

"A few years under a century," he said. "His teeth seem to belong to the Silurian epoch."

"Of course he ain't a colt!" cried Old Bizness. "D'ye s'pose I'd risk my delicate anatomy on a frisky filly? Whar do ye think I came from? Gentlem'n, ef you don't want to trade or buy, the graveyard will resume its tour."

These remarks called out a loud burst of laughter in the midst of which somebody exclaimed:

"Hyar comes Gold Trigger! Now we will hev a circus!"

Approaching the scene of merriment, was a man who was the beau ideal of the far-western sport.

Tall and elegantly framed, with the well-known but not displeasing affectation of the

true dandy, the new-comer was the person to command attention. A handsome face whose only hirsute ornament was the luxuriant black mustache, rendered him a modern Adonis.

His clothes fitted his figure well, and not a sign of weapons was visible about his person.

If the crowd had been watching Old Bizness narrowly, when his eye first encountered the Sport, it would have detected a latent gleam of recognition.

But the man almost immediately returned to the subject of sale and barter.

"This is a hoss what shows his p'in's!" he continued. "I'm sorry the sun 's gone down, fur you could stan' Morpheen between you an' it an' see the soundness ov his lungs an' digestitory apparatus. How much am I offered fur the hoss? bridle an' saddle thrown in, an' burrs, too! Gimme a bid; hyar's the cheapest dose ov morpheen thet ever struck ye. Er I'll trade 'im fur anything—claims, pistols, corn ile, er a good character. But, thet's mighty scarce in these parts."

By this time the Sport had reached the spot; he had heard Old Bizness's last words; after which their eyes met.

"You're after a trade, eh?" asked Gold Trigger. "What have you to swap?"

"This hoss, this Ukraine ov the Tartar breed, to be poetical."

"A horse?" replied the Sport, moving forward with a wink at his nearest companions. "Where is the animal? If there is a horse here, my friend, will you please designate it?"

The eyes of the trader seemed to dance; he was mad.

"What d'ye call this, Ban'box?" he roared, slapping Morpheen's hips with his great palm.

"That? Oh, a sheep, p'r'aps—certainly not a horse."

The crowd fairly cheered, but the Sport only noticed Old Bizness's disgust and chagrin with a faint smile.

"I've heered ov you," said the trader, looking sternly into Gold Trigger's face. "Whar I've been lately many a tale hes been told about you, but I never heered nobody say thet you war a coward! Morpheen is me when ennybody insults 'im, an' you've done thet very thing, Murell Anton! So hyar goes fur choice ov weepins; hilt er p'int?"

Old Bizness as he spoke had drawn his bowie-knife, and held it at the point, ready for a throw into the air.

Gold Trigger looked at the man, and then glanced over his shoulder.

"Back out an' I'll post you a cowardly skunk on every rock an' tree in the kentry," said the trader. "I'm Old Bizness cl'ar up to the handle. Ar' you goin' to give the onery lie to every good report I've heard about you? Hilt or p'int?"

"Point!" said Gold Trigger scarcely parting his lips to utter his choice.

Up went the knife, whirling over and over as it ascended, and the spectators watched it, holding their breath.

Old Biz watched it, too, and when it struck the ground and quivered there with its point deeply imbedded in the mold, he looked at Gold Trigger and said quietly:

"You've won; thet is six times I've lost within the last two weeks, four times by the hilt, two by the p'int. Wal, nominate yer weepins, Murell."

"Ah! the choice is mine," said the Sport abruptly as if he had been roused from a dream. "Well, I choose the bowie-knife."

The crowd started and looked into each other's faces.

What! Murell Anton the Sport choosing the terrible dirk for mortal combat, when he had never missed a man with his famous gold-triggered revolvers?

Did the man want to die?

"You've hit me squar', Murell!" said the trader, as with a sweep of his long arm, he took up the knife. "I'm kind o' handy with the blade. I must say this to give you warnin'. How do you want to fight?"

The Sport looked up and asked with astonishing coolness:

"How have you been fighting?"

"Wal, when it is the knife, I'm used to standin' back to back with my man. When the signal is given we step one pace apart, wheel about an' go fur each other's liver!"

"The idea suits me exactly!" was all that Gold Trigger said, and the next moment Old Bizness faced his horse.

"Gentlem'n," he said to the crowd, "while the show is goin' on you kin observe the fine p'int about thet hoss, an' when the curt'in falls you kin trot out yer tradin' stock, or furever after hold yer peace."

This was uttered in a dry tone, but it called out no smiles.

The sun had now gone down, and Panther City was in shadow.

"It is too dark to fight decently," said a rough fellow. The moon will hang out her lanterns in thirty minutes."

Old Bizness looked at the Sport. "Thet's so," he said, sententiously. "What do you say?"

"I leave it to you."

"I guess we'll wait," was the response. "I want to give you a fair shake, Murell. In all his checkered career old Pand'y Roorback hez tried to deal squar'ly with his feller-man. Thirty minytes, eh? Wal, I've often swapped a dozen hosses in thet time."

And the strange man leaned against his somnolent horse, and with folded arms quietly began to bide the rising of the moon.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUNT FOR HEARTS.

WHEN the silvery rim of the moon made its appearance over the edge of the horizon, the Sport turned from a group of men with whom he had been conversing, and quietly drew an elegant dirk from beneath his coat.

The moment for the combat was near at hand.

"You still want to fight me, Pand'y?" asked Murell Anton, facing Old Bizness who yet leaned against his horse.

"You kin fight er be branded ez a coward all over the kentry," was the answer.

"Then let us at it at once and get this busi-

ness off our hands. But, may I have a word with you in private?"

Old Bizness appeared surprised at the request, but answered quickly: "Sart'inly. Though I'm not a coroner, I hear anty mortim statements sometimes. I'm at yer sarvice, Murell."

The hand of the Western Sport waved the crowd back, and he found himself face to face and alone with the old man.

"Now go on," ordered Pandey.

For a moment Gold Trigger did not speak. He looked into the roughened face of his antagonist, as if he sought something concealed by a mask.

It was a strange spectacle, those two men standing before each other with knives in their hands; one at the middle station of human life, the other young, handsome, strong, a modern Apollo.

"You've asked fur a private interview," continued Old Bizness, piqued by the Sport's silence.

"What hev ye got to say?"

Murell Anton started.

"Yes, I have something to say," he exclaimed.

"You came to Panther City for the purpose of meeting me."

"Thet's a fact."

"You came to slay me—if you could!"

"Wal?"

"You know that I never shirk a fight. I could have chosen pistols and shattered your brain-pan the first fire; but when I saw you I said to myself: 'That man has sworn to kill me. He will not leave Panther City without the blood of Murell Anton. If he does not get it, the others will.'"

"Sart'nly. Then, why didn't you stick to the pistols?"

"I'll tell you why."

Murell Anton moved closer to Pandey Roorback, and lowered his voice, which, without a tremor, told what kind of a man he was.

"I'm the last of the Sports," he continued.

"There were nine of us when we broke our dice-boxes in New York, two years ago. Where the rest are to-night I believe that I need not tell you, Pandey."

"Whar ar' they!" asked Old Bizness, curiously.

"Two are planted in Frisco, one in Deadwood, one on the Yellowstone, Sitting Bull left two more to rot on the plains, and Silver Jim and Shady Sam passed in their checks last winter on the Brazos. Every one of the boys died with their boots on, and with weapons in their hands. We were doomed from the night when we broke our dice-boxes in New York; the same agent of death has followed us. I saw the hand of the avenger everywhere. Sometimes it carried a rifle, sometimes knife or pistol; twice it carried a bow. I knew that my time would come and a thousand times I said to myself: 'Never mind, Murell. You'll join the boys. All that you have to do is to die as they did, with steel in your hand.' My time may be here, now, Pandey. That merciless avenger has sent you hither for the blood of the last of the Sports."

Old Bizness heard the Sport without an interruption.

"So you war lookin' fur the call?" he queried.

"Not exactly. I didn't think my summons would come in such a shape."

Gold Trigger drew his fine figure up proudly as he spoke, and cast a look of disgust upon the lank form before him.

"We'll not discuss the garb that death messengers should wear," said Pandey Roorback. "Hev you anything else to say?"

"Where is the Avenger?"

"Here!"

"Oh, you are but the tool—the hired knife, as it were. You know whom I mean. Where is that person?"

"I'm under orders," was the unsatisfactory rejoinder. "You understand me, Murell. The moon is up now. I've got a long road before me, an' I want to be off."

"Then, curse you! come on!" cried the Sport.

"One minute, look hyar," cried Old Bizness, grasping Gold Trigger's arm and detaining him.

"If you'd like to use pistols we'll go back to 'em. I war to let you fight yer own way."

"No!" almost thundered Murell. "Knives have been chosen; with them we fight! With pistols—pish! you'd never get to groan: see!"

As he finished the Sport drew an elegant weapon from beneath his coat and changed his knife to his left hand. The next moment by a dexterous toss he sent the blade spinning up into the moonlight, watching it as it seemed in a half careless manner.

All at once, when the knife was scarcely visible he raised the revolver and fired at it, scarcely taking aim. While the report still sounded the dirk fell at his feet, and a second later he handed it to Old Bizness with a proud smile.

The horse-trader received it from Murell and glanced at its shining sides.

"I see," he said, not exhibiting the least surprise, "you split the bullet on the edge ov the weepin. I could do that when I war twelve year old."

As the dirk was returned, Gold Trigger turned away.

"Let us split hearts on the edge of our dirks!" he hissed, madly.

"I'm at yer sarvice!" was the curt reply.

The preliminaries for the strange duel were speedily arranged. A burly fellow called Mountain Bill selected the ground and placed the men back to back.

"Ye've agreed on the tarms," he said. "At the signal ye'r to step one pace apart, turn an' hunt fur each other's hearts with the dirks."

Gold Trigger's face was turned toward the fair round moon.

His friends saw that he stood erect, but with closed eyes. The knife clutched in his right hand was at his side, its needle point turned toward Old Bizness.

"Ready!" cried the rough voice of Mountain Bill, as he stepped back.

"Ready!" answered the duelists.

"One!—two!—turn an' at it!"

The men separated instantly, having stepped apart, and all at once they wheeled simultaneously and advanced upon each other.

We need not say that at that exciting moment the bronzed spectators held their breath.

They saw the two antagonists meet like tigers in the moonlight, they caught the lightning gleam of polished steel, and then they saw the figure of Gold Trigger reel from the long arm of Pandey Roorback!

A cry of horror and rage rose from hundreds of throats; it drowned the piercing yell that death seemed to tear from the Sport's tongue as he touched the ground.

"That's the last one!" remarked Old Bizness, in a tone of satisfaction, as he walked quietly toward his horse, and as he reached the docile brute and took up the rein, he turned to the mad crowd.

"Gentlem'n, you can't change the decrees ov fate!" he said. "If them nine Sports hed 'a' stuck to the dice-boxes in New York, the last an' the bravest ov 'em all wouldn't be lyin' thar now—wiped out! I'm a firm believer in thet good old doctrine ov predestination: it hed to be done, an' I hed to do it. Now who hez a hoss to trade before I bid you adieu?"

The reply was a roar of rage, the bursting forth of a volcano of curses and blood-cries.

The crowd surged forward, headed by the burly form of Mountain Bill.

The deep, dark eyes of Pandey Roorback seemed to flash fire; he saw pistols and knives everywhere. But he calmly took his rifle from the saddle and lifted his long figure upon the back of the little horse without an effort.

"Thar's more'n one death in Old Bizness, men," he said, surveying the mob. "He's the concentrated essence ov the article when he's r'iled. Gold Trigger had a fair showin', but it hed to be done. Ef you knowed why I came hyar to-night, you'd say thet it war a case ov eye fur eye, er tooth fur tooth. Old Pandey Roorback got the only blood he wanted to-night, but he kin take more ef you make 'im. What ar' you goin' to do, men ov Panther City? Ef you want a new graveyard started, Old Bizness ar' at yer sarvice."

The mad men of Panther City came to a halt.

The quiet tone, coupled to the determined visage of the man on the scrubby animal, was enough to make them stop and consider.

They saw, too, the bronzed finger that seemed to toy with the trigger of the long-barreled rifle. Perhaps Mountain Bill noticed that the weapon covered his brawny breast.

"Ef it war a case ov eye an' eye, thet puts a different handle on the jug," admitted Bill.

"I sw'ar it war. You'll all know by an' by."

At that moment a hand was laid on Mountain Bill's arm from the crowd behind him, and he gently turned his head.

A second later he heard some words that threw a new gleam into his eyes, and shaking off the hand, he turned to Old Bizness again.

"Go!" he said. "Git out of this kentry. But, recollect thet from this night thar'll be an avenger at *your* heels as marceless as the one thet hunted the nine Sports down. The blood ov Gold Trigger will foller you till the end ov yer career. Take thet pile ov bones you're on an' yer own carcass outen Panther City right away, er quicker, ef ye kin. We give you a good start because you gave Gold Trigger a pretty fair showin'; but you'll see the men ov Panther City ag'in—you an' thet avenger, whoever he be!"

Pandey Roorback smiled derisively at Mountain Bill's inflamed utterances.

"Ye'r' clever!" he retorted. "Wal, jest ez soon ez I'm gone slip yer dogs an' go fur the game. I'd sooner hev Injuns or white cusses arter me than deal out a cold deck. Gentlem'n, with all his failin's, an' they war legion, I guess Murell Anton war the best persimmon on the tree. Plant 'im decently, an' say that he fought Pandey Roorback with his own weepin. Now we're off, Morpheen. Gentlem'n, an affectionate adieu. When we meet ag'in 'twill be under different sarcumstances."

As Old Bizness uttered the final word, he struck the meager ribs of his pony with his heavy boot-heels, and the little brute started up as if roused from a dream of forage.

The next minute he was bearing his rider down the main street of Panther City, and at last the grotesque pair disappeared.

Beyond the border town the land gradually ascended until it terminated in many places in great peaks and table-lands.

On the other side of these elevations were the death lands of the Crows, Blackfeet and Crees, and Old Pandey's face was turned directly toward them.

But he suddenly drew rein half-way up one of the ascents, and looked down upon the wooden buildings which he had just left.

"It hed to be done!" he muttered, and then he shook his bony fist at the city. "I wish they would hunt Old Pandey Roorback!" he cried. "I jest wish they'd turn out *en masse* an' play bloodhound. I hev'n't been hunted fur so long thet I fureget how it goes. Come on, men ov Panther! I've never been so keen fur a little diversion before, an' I've been hunter long enough to long fur a bit ov *vice versa*."

Ah! if Old Bizness knew what the words were that had been whispered in Mountain Bill's ear, he would not have resumed his journey with a shout of defiance and savage glee.

He went over the hills and down into the death depths of the Indian-land; but the enemies that he left behind were not to lose sight of him.

Did they hunt him down? Was the threat-prophecy as it rung from Mountain Bill's lips fulfilled?

CHAPTER III.

HUNTED STILL.

It was a fortnight after the duel in Panther City, and again the long shadows of evening lay among the mountain chasms of the Northwest.

"Halt! Aida," said one of two youthful riders who had just entered a gulch whose rough walls were cast in shadow. "Here is another of those uncouth manifestoes. Let us see if this one is worded like the others."

The speaker, who possessed a fair girlish face, had already drawn rein, and was leaning toward the chasm wall as if intent upon inspecting a piece of dingy paper that adhered to it.

"It does not seem to be the same as the ones we have passed; they, you know, were written in rough capitals; this one is traced in horrid chirography."

"Tear it down and we'll read it when the moon comes up."

"No! I do not want to disturb it. Have a little patience, Aida, and I'll master it where it is."

"Well, go ahead."

For several moments the first speaker studied the rude tracery on the paper in a persistent manner which told that it was being mastered.

"Ah! I knew I would master the manifesto!" was the ejaculation of triumph. "Now, Aida, if you will lend me your ears I promise you that you will be slightly startled."

The girl called Aida who had fallen into a reverie lifted her head at the sound of her companion's voice, and bade her proceed.

"I can read it without looking on," was the reply, and instead of fixing her eyes again on the paper the fair speaker looked into her friend's face. "Now listen! here it is:

"BLOOD FOR BLOOD!"

"We, the men of Panther City, have sworn to kill one Pandy Roorback who spilled the blood of our gentleman pard, Gold Trigger. He belongs to us: our knives and pistols hold a mortgage on his heart, and we're the only ones what have a right to foreclose it. We will kill the person who sheds a drop of Pandy Roorback's blood, outside of our circle. This is to give notice to all, red and white. Pandy is ours: death to the man who robs us of our prey."

"THE FORTY AVENGERS."

Aida listened until the reading ended.

"That manifesto is different from the others," she said. "Do you think they have caught Pandy Roorback?"

"I do not. But do you not make a discovery by the reading of this bill of outlawry?"

"A discovery?" asked Aida strangely.

"Yes."

"Read it again and slower than before."

This was done.

"I am ashamed to confess that nothing new strikes me," said Aida, coloring slightly. "But I may be dull of apprehension to-night. Enlighten me, please, for I am all curiosity now."

"The last part of the first sentence contains the discovery I have made," was the reply.

"Gold Trigger, the last of the Sports, is not dead. Pandy Roorback failed to accomplish his mission; he struck, but did not kill. If he had succeeded this paper would have told us so; he merely spilled some of Murell Anton's blood. And now the tigers of Panther are hunting him. By my heart, Aida, I trust they'll catch him—no! we will find him ourselves, and pay him for his miserable failure."

"Alive! Murell Anton, the last of the Nine, still living?" mused Aida, in a tone that did not fail to reach her companion's ears.

"Yes! does not the thought send your blood like lava through your veins? He still incumbers the ground; he, the captain of the infamous brotherhood!"

Aida's black eyes flashed like stars of fire.

"Where is he?" she cried clutching her friend's arm. "Where is that hunted wretch to-night? Oh, heaven! as I think, my brain burns, my veins seem on fire; a current of flame leaps through my heart, and that tigerish, inhuman thirst for vengeance, maddens me. Ivien; do you know where Murell Anton is at this hour?"

If our weak-armed tool struck him deep, he must be where they parted. Ah! is he not in Panther City? Those men are his champions; they call him their friend, and they have sworn to avenge his blood.

"He is there! there! Come, Ivien; do not sit there and stare at me as if I were mad. We have suffered alike; we have hunted and killed for the same purpose. Why did we send that foolish old man to do the work we had sworn to do? The fever was upon us then. Do you not recollect that we thought our end had come when we made him our avenger, and sent him after the last of the Nine? We are not strong again, but we are living; the trail is still ours, Ivien; and the last victim is left for our stroke. I am going. When we have struck the last brother of the Black Cross we will go back. But not until then! no, not until then!"

The face of the speaker was ghastly in coloring, and she tottered as she dropped back into her saddle seat.

"Whither would you go?" asked Ivien.

"We can have but one goal now—the heart of Murell Anton!" was the response.

"Where will we find him?"

"In Panther City!"

Despite her calmness, Ivien started.

"Would you enter there where discovery by that desperate man is certain death?"

"We crossed the mountains on a death-hunt. On to Panther City!"

The white hands of the beautiful avenger had caught up the reins, and she was about to urge her steed forward when a sound that came from the north caused both to turn their heads.

For one brief moment they saw nothing, and then a multitude of grotesque shapes appeared at the further end of the gulch.

"Do you know what that means?" asked Ivien.

"Who does not? The red fiends have crossed the mountains; they are going to fall upon Panther City like a pack of wolves. They may snatch Murell Anton from us!"

"They shall not do that!"

"Then on to Panther City! Once beyond this gulch we can ride like the wind; we can warn the men of Panther. Are you ready?"

"I am ready!"

The horses ridden by the girl avengers started from the spot where they had halted, and went rapidly through the gulch while the Indians were entering at the northern end.

They emerged upon land less rough, and turning the heads of their steeds toward the south, shot away like Indian arrows.

They had exercised caution in escaping from the gulch, but the ears of the human wolves had heard.

A few moments later the band poured from the chasm and drew rein in the gloaming. There the mountain warriors presented an appearance that would have called a burst of admiration from the most unromantic heart.

Three hundred stalwart Blackfoot braves they were, mounted on great, strong-limbed horses, whose flowing manes and tails were ornaments of beauty, and whose arched necks were synonyms of strength.

It was a band of giants, too, for each brave

towered four feet above the back of his steed, which he sat like a finished equestrian.

As the Indians emerged from the gulch several sprung upright, and swept the view before them with eager eyes.

Did they see the two girls flying to warn their enemies of the approach of the red wolves? or did they hear the hoofs of their steeds?

At any rate, the hunters had something to report to the giant leader of the band, and an instant later ten Blackfeet rode to the front. The horses they bestrode seemed fashioned for speed; their riders were willowy fellows, who did not appear to be incumbered by any weapons.

They were the hunters of the war band.

As they looked at their chief for instructions, they saw his arm go up and his finger point toward the south.

"Go and catch the foxes who have heard!" he said.

That was enough, and almost before the last word had left his lips, the ten hunters had disappeared.

"We are followed!" suddenly cried Ivien. "We did not leave the gulch soon enough. If our pursuers are the ten Indians of whom Pandey Roorback has spoken, we may not be able to reach Panther City."

"We must! we shall!" said Aida. "Do not forget for one moment that Murell Anton is there! We must be near the place."

"Three miles yet, Aida."

The two horses were straining every nerve to reach the goal toward which their eager riders were driving them.

Behind thundered the red ten, and not very far behind them, in turn, rode the two hundred and ninety tigers of the Northwest.

What were the men of Panther City doing?

There was a crowd on the spot where we have seen the meeting of Old Bizness and Gold Trigger. It was a wild, boisterous crowd, but a man, mounted on a barrel in the midst of it, was trying to quiet it with a voice that seemed to issue from lungs of brass.

He was a giant in stature, a man with a mass of unkempt hair and beard, with wild, ferocious eyes, and arms bared to the elbow.

"Hold on, thar!" he vociferated. "Shut yer meat-traps, men ov Panther, an' let Mountain Bill deliver his opinion. I know how ye feel; but Gold Trigger ain't dead. He ain't goin' to die. No! by the ghosts ov the Rockies! he's goin' to throttle death an' live to come right side up. Whar is the man what wouldn't go wild now an' then who'd hed the p'int ov a knife in the subarbs ov his heart! We'll take vengeance fur his blood; afore long we'll ketch the man what hez the audacity to come back an' post notices ov defiance on the rocks."

Mountain Bill was listened to with better attention than he had expected to receive, and he had scarcely finished when two horses flecked with foam and ready to sink to the ground halted in sight of all.

"Great Jehosaphat!" cried Bill. "Whar on airth did them fellars come from?"

The next moment he darted from the barrel, and dashing through the crowd made his way to the two avengers.

"See hyar—"

"Let us talk!" interrupted Aida. "We came here to save. Your lives are in danger. Three hundred Blackfoot Indians have thundered at our heels for ten miles. They are going to fall upon you like an avalanche, sparing nothing, but crushing all. Quick! arm! you have not a minute to lose—not a second!"

A united shout of defiance rose from the crowd, and Bill found few to address when he turned from the girls.

"We'll empty saddles, ha! ha!" he said. "Panther City will vote you a gold medal fur yer ride. Whar did you come from?"

"From the North. Where is Gold Trigger?"

At that moment Mountain Bill shrunk from Aida's horse, and when the question fell from her tongue he was staring at her with an expression difficult to analyze.

"You! you!" he shouted suddenly. "Do you come hyar to tell the men ov Panther thet the Injuns ar' comin'?"

"We are not altogether unmerciful," answered Aida, as the white hand that clutched an elegant revolver rose threateningly. "Since you have recognized us, I will disguise nothing. We came hither to save and to slay. Where is Murell Anton?"

Mountain Bill did not reply, but shutting his lips tightly, sent a smile of defiance at the girl hunters.

"The truth, or death!" flashed Aida.

Her right arm was stretched toward the mountaineer, the muzzle of the revolver almost touched him.

"The truth, or death!" she repeated.

Then Mountain Bill spoke.

"I'll take some ov the latter," he calmly said, as his brawny hands with one mad wrench bared his breast for the bullet. "Gold Trigger an' Mountain Bill ar' pards thet never go back on each other—never!"

Aida hesitated.

The next instant the wild war-cry of the Blackfoot nation sounded like the blast of death, and a volley of firearms replied.

The red wolves had fallen upon the Panther City!

CHAPTER IV.

THE TWO PARDS.

"STAND firm, men of Panther! Cold lead an' plenty of it for the red hellyons! Hyar they come ag'in! Now, drop 'em from their hosses. Gosh! how they tumble when we shoot!"

The volley which had given reply to the first cheering war-whoop of the savages drove them back for a moment.

The men of Panther City had fired with good effect, for twenty bronzed bodies were sent tumbling to the ground.

The enemy drew back to reform; wild and savage though they were, they possessed the discipline of regular cavalry.

After the volley the forces of the defenders were increased; men came from every direction with arms in their hands. Stern determination and unflinching courage were depicted on the countenance of each, as they stood shoulder to shoulder in the moonlight with bronzed fingers at easy triggers, and eyes fixed madly upon the

red marauders forming on the plain for the second onslaught.

Let us leave this scene for a moment.

We left Mountain Bill and the two avengers face to face, the bravery of the one confronting the hesitation of the others.

Yes, Aida hesitated.

"If you're goin' to shoot, *shoot*," broke in the rough, but impatient voice of Mountain Bill. "The boys need me down thar; the greasy brutes hev struck Panther. What ar' you goin' to do?"

The pistol arm of the fair girl fell.

"Go and defend Panther," she said. "Go and save the life of the man you refuse to betray."

"I'll do it, bet yer sweet life," was the answer, as the rough started away. "The reds shall get Mountain Bill's compliments now. Mebbe I ought to thank you because you hed me at the muzzle an' on the trigger. But we'll meet ag'in. Ye're goin' to hunt Gold Trigger till you find 'im, I s'pose?"

"That we shall! We will find him, too!"

"Wal, I'm goin' to help the boys. Won't you go down an' see the fun?"

"No."

Without another word the Sport's friend darted away, leaving the two avengers the only occupants of the square; near them stood the barrel from which the character just departed had harangued the crowd; but it was without an orator.

"A ride for nothing," said Ivien, at last. "We are in the den, but the wolf hides in some impenetrable recess. We must come again."

"Again?" replied Aida, starting. "What will we find after the savages have departed? The ruins of Panther City and the bones of her defenders!"

"Hark!"

"Ah! the charging whoop of the red horsemen!"

Ivien grasped the rein of her steed as she spoke, and turned her face toward the plain.

"I'd like to see the onset," she said, with eager eyes. "Pandy Roorback talked so much about an Indian charge!"

"There! do not speak the name of that wretch who failed to do the work he swore to do. I shall never mention it until I can pay him for his failure. Why don't the men of Panther fire?"

Had the whites deserted their posts?

All at once a line of fire became visible, and then a thunderous report made the girls start in their saddles. The men of Panther had not fled.

"Ha! they've checked the Indians!" exclaimed Ivien. "I feel like shouting for the rough men of Panther."

"Checked them? no, Ivien. Listen! they are coming on. They carried out their old tactics, I'll warrant. They dropped alongside their horses at the right moment. Ah! those Blackfeet are cunning devils."

Aida's words seemed to be confirmed by the sounds that were now borne to their ears.

The charge of that bronze squadron was simply resistless. Despite the terrible volley poured into their ranks, under the direction of

Mountain Bill, they came on like devils incarnate, and fell upon the determined few who madly attempted to withstand the charge!

For one brief minute the revolver played an important part in the nocturnal battle, and then the foe came on, yelling like demons.

"Come! we *must* go!" Ivien cried, grasping Aida's arm. "To remain here another minute is to die, and to die is to let that one man escape our vengeance."

"They will finish him anyhow."

"The knife of Pandy Roorback did not slay. Fate is reserving him for us. My word for it, girl, he will escape the vengeance of the Blackfeet."

"I will believe you!" was the quick answer. "But I hate to leave the den when the wolf is within reach of our arms. Still, it must be so."

Then it was that two horses sprung forward and bore the girls across the square.

The next moment twenty Indians appeared upon the spot, and in lieu of a white enemy, began an indiscriminate onslaught on the inoffensive barrel.

Mountain Bill was among those who escaped.

Armed with the strength of a giant, he seized the bridle of a strong-limbed Blackfoot horse and planted a bullet in the head of his rider at the same time. Then, throwing himself upon the steed, he galloped away and soon found himself on the little plain, hatless and out of breath, but unharmed.

For several moments he sat still as if listening to the wild revelry of the Blackfeet in Panther City. But his lips were compressed, and in his eyes was the glitter of a madness that could not be expressed in language.

"It ar' kinder queer thet both should come in one night—the Blackfeet an' the Death Angels," he said, speaking in a low but harsh tone. "I knowed thet the latter would find him; *thet* war only a question ov time. But thet the Injuns should come at the same time! it puzzles me. Ah! jist hear 'em makin' merry like old Winfield in the halls of the Montyzumys! By jingo! it r'iles me! my blood b'iles. And ye ar' thar, Gold Trigger. Pard, I did desert ye after all. I played the confounded idiot at last. But, I'm comin' back. Mountain Bill ar' goin' to help you out—to help you out, fur vengeance."

The mountaineer urged his steed toward the doomed town.

He reached the suburbs, where the battle had been fought, and saw the ghastly trophies of the field, red and white, mingled in that horrible confusion which sickens the heart of the bravest.

Riding over them, he entered the town. Panther City was a mile long, but its board shanties were not close together. At the further end the Blackfeet were destroying everything upon which their tomahawks could make any impression.

But Mountain Bill did not pay any attention to the din. He had come back on a mission.

"Thar he is, by my soul!" suddenly fell from his lips as he drew rein in the street. "Talk about killin' thet boy with a knife an' the fever, will ye? He's livin' to pay all his debts. With him it's eye fur eye, tooth fur tooth. Hello, Murell!"

The person addressed turned as if an arrow had pierced his side, and with a cry of recognition, came forward.

Mountain Bill leaped from his horse.

"Bill—Bill, in the name of Tartarus, what means this?" asked the man, whose face was white but handsome. "I thought the accursed fever had seized me again. I heard shots, yells, curses, and shut my eyes. Did I dream? No; I got up; I got to the door and saw a legion of devils go up the street. Tell me, Bill. Have the red eagles, our old red enemies, swooped down on Panther?"

"They hev; but I can't tell you hyar, Murell. We must git away. Hold! let me whisper in your ear—only four words, an' then I know you'll be strong ag'in."

A strange light gleamed in Gold Trigger's eyes, and the next moment the bearded lips of his pard were at his ears.

"*They hev come, too!*" Bill whispered.

Despite his calmness the Sport started from Mountain Bill. There was a cry forming on his lips, but the mountaineer, following him up, grasped his arm and checked it.

"Gods! don't you feel better already? Ef Mountain Bill war Murell Anton, them four words would give him a new lease on life. He'd hev suthin' more than thet man's blood to live fur. They war dressed like boys, but they're feminines, all the same, an' with faces what would turn a young feller's head."

"What fiends they are though! Did they ask for me?"

"Sartainly. All the information thet they got from Bill Daggett they could carry on the p'int ov a knife."

"The news does strengthen me, Bill. My blood flows natural again. Where is my horse?"

"In the stable ef none o' the boys took 'em in their flight."

"They would not do that, I think."

As he spoke Bill thrust the bridle of the captured horse into Gold Trigger's hand and bounded away.

For a moment the eyes of the Sport followed him.

"Few hunted men ever had such a friend as that rough diamond," the Sport murmured. "I believe he would die for me. As we are to go off together he may have that kind of an opportunity. Hunted yet, with a knife wound at my heart. I was just beginning to forget when Pandey Roorback came, and now the real avengers follow me. But I will die game. Courage! courage, Murell Anton! Before you depart this life your merciless hunters, every one, shall herald your coming to the unseen land. I swear it by the stars of heaven! The hunted turns hunter from this night. Murell Anton sets out upon a trail the ending of which shall be vengeance and death!"

As the Sport finished he looked up and saw the giant figure of Mountain Bill at a respectful distance. He was leading a horse.

"I thought I'd not disturb you," Bill said, as he came up. "I know what ye war sayin', an' I concur in the statements most emphatically. Hyer's the hoss. Ef death hedn't got in his work when he did, thar would hev been no Starwing for you to-night."

"What mean you, Bill?"

"Dictionary Dick thought ov the hoss an' made for 'im. But he never got further than the door; he's thar yet. Thar's no wound on him. Them big words ov his'n killed 'im, I guess."

With a faint smile at Bill's observation, Gold Trigger turned to his horse and tried to mount, but fell back with a groan. The next instant his comrade sprung to his assistance and helped him up.

Even then he tottered in the saddle.

"Bill," he said, huskily, "strength is leaving me for the time. Shall we be obliged to ride hard?"

"Mebbe so, Murell."

"Then tie me to Starwing. After awhile I will be strong again."

The Sport's request was speedily complied with, and when Mountain Bill finished the operation he smiled his thanks.

"Now we're off, Murell."

"I am ready."

Bill leaned over and caught the Sport's bridle.

"I'll lead you out o' Panther," he said. "Poor wiped out Panther! fur when the sun rises to-morrow thar'll not be a board to tell whar it stocd."

Murell Anton bit his lips, and Bill had given the word to the horses when a human figure stepped into the center of the street from the shadow of one of the shanties.

"I say, boys, you'd better steer fur Bear River by the way o' Blackfoot Gulch. The hull kentry are full ov Injuns, an' then, if you hev any burnin' desire to resume *my* acquaintance, the Bear River kentry is whar you'll find me!"

Mountain Bill and Gold Trigger held their breath while the voice fell upon their ears. They used their eyes at the same time.

As the last word was uttered the speaker stepped aside to let them proceed.

It was Pandey Roorback!

"Whither shall we go, Murell?" was Bill's question.

"Into the Bear River country for there is where he said we will find him! He's the man of men I want to see!"

CHAPTER V.

BULLET PROOF!

TARDILY, as if loth to shine upon a scene of desolation, the sun crept over the hills on the morning after the onslaught upon Panther City.

Bound to destroy, the Indians had applied the torch, and heaps of ruins marked the spot where the "advance post of civilization" had stood.

Not a living being was visible; the Blackfeet, on retiring had carried off their thirty dead; but the bodies of the unfortunate defenders lay where they had fallen.

At the same time down on the historic Rosebud the same sun was shining upon Custer's last grand battle-field!

Above Panther soared the carrion king of the skies, his keen eyes fixed upon the ghastly feast below. After awhile the sable bird de-

scended, then another and another, and the play of rend and tear began.

One of these birds perched himself upon what appeared to be a guideboard which stood in the middle of the ruined town. The upright post had felt the fire, so had the cross-piece which was black.

If a person had approached this grotesque vulture crowned object he would have discovered something white affixed to the blackened board. This was what is designated in the uncultured Northwest "a notis."

Rude and gigantic, but ill-proportioned, were the letters which if joined properly would have brought to light the following inscription:

"MEN OV PANTHAR!

"It is the arnest desire ov the writer thet this Injun raid be charged ag'in' him. He is ready to settle the account at any time. Hyarafter, onless otherwise engaged, he will be found in the Bear River kentry. If ye've got grit, come on!

"OLD BIZNESS."

The inscription then had been traced by the hand which had driven the knife into Murell Anton's breast, and now he had defied a whole town; no, the maddened survivors of the destroyed habitations.

We have seen Pandy Roorback or Old Bizness, in Panther City during the presence of the Indians. If we had tarried there awhile longer, we might have witnessed the creation of the defiant placard, pinned to the board by a knife which he had evidently picked up on the field of battle.

When the sun came up to read the defiance, Pandy was far from the spot. His parchment-skin face was turned toward the Northeast, or in the direction of the broken Bear River country.

Seated upon the back of that sorry-looking specimen of horse-flesh on which he made his first entry into Panther, he jogged along at a gait that seemed entirely agreeable to the animal.

He had traveled that trail before in all probability, for the lines lying loosely on the horse's neck, told that he trusted entirely to Morpheen's knowledge of the country. Already he was passing the confines of the Bear River lands, and before him lay one of those rough mountain passes always suggestive of ambush, if not of death.

Morpheen's gait, never remarkable at any time, except for the snail-like movements of his limbs, had dwindled into a walk, and slowly the animal was pushing into the pass.

Suddenly there appeared at the mouth of the opening two magnificent horses which bore the two avengers whom we last saw in Panther at the time of the onslaught of the Blackfeet.

It was evident that they had seen Old Bizness while still distant, for they awaited his approach with much patience.

All at once, at a word from Aida, the carbines borne by the twain were thrust over the heads of the horses, and Pandy was "covered" before he knew of the proximity of his watchers.

"Halt!" rung out clear and bell-like upon the bracing mountain air, and Old Pandy, with a

quick start lifted his head. At the same time his horse stopped.

"Wal, by the holy tongs!" he ejaculated, surveying the avengers for a moment, in which time he had recognized them. "This meetin' is wholly onexpected, but no the less agreeable on thet account. So the fever got up an' dusted arter I left. Mebbe I was sech poor company, thet it stayed so thet ye wouldn't get lonely. By gollywink! I'm glad to see ye! I'll come up an' report."

"Stand where you are!" came sternly over the right hand horse. "We will transact our business from where we are at present."

A slight pallor seemed to creep over Pandy Roorback's sallow skin.

"Bless me ef they hevn't drawed a bead on my anatomical structure," he said, as for the first time he noticed the muzzles of the carbines. "Mebbe they've heerd thet I didn't finish Gold Trigger. Wal, I did the best I could. I left 'im fur dead."

Then he spoke to the girl avengers:

"Shell I report from hyar?" he asked.

"No report is necessary. You didn't slay him!"

"That's a fact; but I tried."

"To fail was to be death."

"Sart'inly."

"We are going to carry out the penalty."

"Hyar?"

"Why not here?"

"Wal now, the ginerall run ov humanity would rather choose time and place fur that unpleasantness," remarked the old man drolly.

"Well, have you chosen?"

"Not exactly, but I allus thought that Old Pandy Roorback would like to die a-settin' on Morpheen, but not hyar."

"Where, then?"

Slowly Pandy's gaunt arm went up, and the bony finger pointed over the hills to the north.

"Over thar!" he said, "away down in the Blackfoot kentry. I used to dream ov goin' under over thar whippin' Morpheen's weight in wild-cats an' Injuns. Thar's whar I want to die, an' thar's whar I'm goin' under."

"Perhaps."

"Thar's no perhaps about it. Old Bizness knows what he's talkin' about. Ef you think he lies, try 'im on."

There was defiance in his tone.

"We sent you on a mission of death," said Aida. "You took a solemn oath that you would slay the last of the Sports. You hunted him, and in Panther City you found your man. But there your arm weakened; there you broke your vow, and to-day that wretch—that tiger Sport—is at large. You swore that we might take your life if you failed to take his. We claim that right now—here!"

"All right," said Pandy. "A man can't allus get his favorite dyin'-spot, so you kin go on with the funeral!"

The girls exchanged glances.

There was pity and forgiveness in Ivien's deep-blue orbs, but in Aida's sloe-black depths there was only the gleam of vengeance.

"I will award the death penalty," she said in low tones to her companion, "The man who failed, I will kill."

Then her cheek dropped to the polished stock of the carbine, into the muzzle of which Old Bizness was looking with calmness.

For one brief moment this tableau was presented, and then the shrill shot resounded among the hills.

Pandy Roorback's lips flew asunder as he started violently back, but the next instant he had recovered, and there was a grim smile on his mummied face.

"Didn't you know that Old Bizness is bullet-proof?" he said. "By the jumpin' horn spoon! thar's nothin' on this side ov the hills thet kin keep 'im from dyin' in Blackfoot land. I felt the thug ov the leaden pill, but it wouldn't go in. Ef I war strapped I'd willingly let you empty thet carbine at my breast fur a nickel a shot. Mebbe the other gal's got the better weepin'."

Old Pandy looked at Ivien as he spoke, but the girl shook her head.

"Don't like to try it, eh?"

"You are free to proceed, so far as I am concerned," she said.

As for Aida, she was still staring at the strange man at whom she had fired. What manner of being was he that his breast would turn the ball of a carbine at forty yards?

"I, too, will let him pass," she said at last.

"He must be more than man, and I hope we will never again encounter him."

The next moment the horses of the twain were guided apart, and the pathway of the gulch left clear for Old Bizness.

"Am I to go through?" he asked.

"You are, but we want you to recollect that Murell Anton belongs to us. You are not to touch him."

"Oho! I strongly suspect thet I've got an ap'ointment with him in the B'ar River kentry at this writin'."

"You have?"

"Yes, me; Pandy Roorback!"

The old man had halted between the avengers; his little eyes were glistening like the orbs of the cobra, his whole nature was aroused.

"Then go and hunt him!" flashed Aida.

"From this spot we begin a race for Murell Anton's heart. May the best horse win."

"If it hangs on horseflesh, Morpheen ar' likely to come out behind," and Pandy glanced at his dolorous palfrey. "But this ar' race doesn't depend on thet. Now, you girls, what I nursed when you hed the fever down on Big Brier—you hev'riled me. I'm ginerally a man o' peace, who would, on the hull, rather indulge in a hoss-trade than raise Injun ha'r, but when I come to solid biz'ness an' hunt fur a man, I allus ketch 'im—allus! Now hear me, ye two Death Angels; you've smoothed Old Pandy's fur the wrong way. An' hyar he sw'ars to foller Murell Anton, the man you hate an' to kill him afore you shed one drop ov his blood. Do you hear thet?"

The girls colored. Aida, passion-maddened, leaned toward the speaker, and lifted her right hand solemnly over his head.

"And we swear—we who have cause to hate and to kill—that we will yet have Murell Anton's life-blood!" she cried. "We will not stop until we have found him. As for you, sir, if you

balk us in our hunt we will turn upon you and ascertain whether your eyeballs are bullet-proof. The next time it will rot be your heart. Remember this!"

Old Pandy listened with defiance in his eyes, and when Aida's last mad word was pronounced, he contemptuously resumed the reins and spoke to his horse.

"I'm kinder forgetful, Morpheen," he said. "Jest recollect them ar' words;" and the next moment he passed on.

The girls stared after him until he passed out of sight, when they turned to each other.

"He is going to baffle us at last," declared Ivien.

"That man baffle us?" cried Aida. "Heaven has given Murell Anton to us. No power shall deprive us of the final vengeance. Now for the Bear River country. We are all to meet there. The race for a heart has begun."

A moment later the horses bounded away, but the next instant Aida drew rein with a startling cry.

"Look! Ivien!" she cried, pointing to the south. "A runaway horse! and he has a rider, too!"

Ivien, the youngest of the avengers, turned.

"He is coming this way! The man does not try to master him; he is dead!"

"Dead or not, he is tied to the horse!" ejaculated Aida. "He lives! he lives! See! he tries to rise. Oh! merciful Heaven! vengeance is playing for us. That man is Murell Anton! I'd know him a hundred miles away!"

CHAPTER VI.

FROM PERIL TO PERIL.

WHEN Pandy Roorback left Panther City after his duel with Murell Anton, the Sport, it was with the firm conviction that he had fulfilled his mission and put an end to that worthy's life.

We have already seen that he went over the hills with his face turned toward the Indian country. But he did not remain absent long. Perhaps because he was not immediately followed by Mountain Bill and his men he came back to find Murell Anton alive.

If he had known that his blow had failed to deprive the Sport of his life, he would not have left Panther without accomplishing his mission. Bill, however, knew this when he bade Pandy depart, threatened with future revenge.

The old fellow was on his way to the Bear river country, when the Death Angels encountered him, and after the meeting he resumed his journey. But, Morpheen was now exhibiting some signs of activity, for, instead of walking leisurely along, he went through the gulch at a speed which no stranger ever would have imputed to his limbs.

Therefore, the sight of the runaway horse which carried the hunted Sport toward his enemies did not greet his eyes, and Old Pandy passed beyond the chasm unconscious of the scene being enacted behind him.

Ivien drew a beautifully-ornamented revolver from her belt when the name of the involuntary rider fell from Aida's lips.

They saw that the Sport's legs were bound se-

curely to the horse, which came forward with flowing mane and dilated eyes. Murell Anton was helpless. If he could not fall off, he was powerless to rise and check the speed of his courser.

"The Indians found him!" ejaculated Aida, who had not taken her eyes from the scene for a moment. "Several arrows are sticking in the animal's flanks; they madden him. Heavens! we hope there is no shaft in the victim's heart."

On came the horse, his goal to all appearances the gulch now behind the spectators. The girls had but little time for action.

"Shoot the horse!" cried Ivien. "It will throw *him* into our hands."

"I might hit the man," was the response.

"Ah! but what we do, must be done quickly."

Aida did not reply.

The Sport's steed seemed to be making directly for her, as if determined to pass over her into the gulch where the shadows lay.

"You can't check that horse! You will be killed!" exclaimed Ivien, as she saw Aida take the reins in her left hand and lean forward, her right hand free and her lips tightly compressed.

There was no response; Murell Anton's horse was about to collide with the young avengers. Ivien held her breath; her heart seemed to stand still.

All at once the white hand of the girl hunter darted at the unsecured bridle-rein of the runaway, and grasped it firmly.

But the next moment her own steed was hurled back upon his haunches, and she was jerked from the saddle as if struck by an ascending bomb.

Ivien shouted aloud at this catastrophe; she saw her companion's horse riderless and struggling on the ground, while toward the gulch dashed the black steed, with a girlish figure dangling at his bit!

Volition seemed to have deserted the white-faced spectator. She shut her eyes, that she might not see Aida fall to the ground and be trampled to death by the hoofs of Murell Anton's horse.

Gallantly the avenger at the bit struggled to arrest the charger's speed; but what could the arms of a young girl accomplish in that direction? The horse was strong, tireless, and half-crazed, for were there not three Indian arrows in his flesh?

At last Ivien started forward.

"Heaven help me to rescue her!" fell from her lips as she struck her horse with the sharp silver spurs that glistened at her heels.

Like an arrow shot from a Blackfoot bow, Ivien sped toward the chasm.

Aida had almost disappeared, but Ivien had mentally determined not to lose sight of her.

She dashed down the gulch, and suddenly swept out into the rather open country beyond.

But where were the black horse and his two captives?

Poor Ivien! She felt a dizziness take possession of her as the desolated scenery about her on every hand put the interrogative.

She rode on; now to the right, now to the left,

only to halt at last and cry from the bottom of her heart:

"Aida—Aida, where are you?"

The horse had disappeared as suddenly and effectually as if the ground had opened and engulfed him.

"I will not desert her," cried Ivien. "My blood chills when I think that she may be the prisoner of Murell Anton. Oh, Heaven forbid! She must have been borne upward to the tops of the hills. Ha! here are horse-tracks, going up—up! Courage, Aida! while I live, you shall not be deserted."

With a somewhat lighter heart the eager girl followed the hoof-prints that had caught her eye in the soft ground. They looked fresh; they went up a narrow way between two hills. She felt that they would lead her to Aida.

Pushing up the trail, Ivien saw nothing but the tracks which she so eagerly followed.

At length she reached the top of the ascent, and her horse, panting from over-exhaustion, planted his feet firmly on the summit.

Far and wide could the girl see from the spot where she had halted, but not a living being rewarded her vision.

No Aida! no black horse! no Murell Anton! Ivien felt her heart sink within her bosom.

Suddenly a sound startled the despairing girl.

She became satisfied that the gulch was tenanted again; but by whom?

"I will go and see," she sighed. "As I am above them they will notice me."

But she did not ride toward the edge of the cliffs, for, as she lifted the rein for that purpose, she heard sounds that made her unsling the carbine, and turn her eyes to the path by which she had reached the spot she occupied.

Somebody was coming up to her! There was more than one. Were they, too, hunting the black horse? or did they know that she was there, waiting to greet them as friends or as foes?

Ivien glanced over her shoulder as she waited, and mentally selected a way for retreat.

Then she turned her eyes upon the path and kept them fixed there, while her finger touched the trigger of the carbine that rested between her horse's ears.

All at once the head of a horse shot into sight and the next moment as he bounded forward Ivien saw the superb figure of his rider, a Blackfoot warrior, carried into full view.

A light cry fell from her lips—a cry of surprise—for she had expected to encounter a white face; but she did not hesitate.

Before the Indian could discern her, the leveled rifle spoke, and leaping into the air with a death-yell, he fell back and disappeared among the feathered heads just rising into sight.

The next instant several scarlet bodies leaped into view, but again and again the rifle of the girl avenger woke the echoes of the Blackfoot hills, and the handsome horses and their scalp-hunting riders disappeared in confusion below the brow of the cliffs!

"My first Indians! may they be my last," muttered the girl as she turned her steed, and a moment later she went northward like a startled quarry. "Aida, I must desert you for a time; but when I have outwitted these red wolves, I

will come back to rejoin you in our work of vengeance."

No rein was drawn until Ivien had put ten miles between her and the scene of her combat.

She found herself in a romantic little valley, clad in the warmest sunshine, and as breezy as a grove. It was her first visit to the place, as she well knew.

Ivien slid to the ground at sight of a little creek whose clear waters rippled through the sunny vale.

Holding the bridle of her horse, which moved eagerly to the rivulet, Ivien advanced and knelt at the water's edge. How refreshing was the element! how cool and delightful! but then, she was exhausted.

Long and deep the deserted girl drank—drank eagerly, until her horse started and raised his head. The incident roused Ivien, and the next moment, with an exclamation of surprise still quivering her lips, she stood erect, gazing at the scene before her.

Just beyond the stream ten rough-looking men sat on as many horses, and the eyes of each were fixed upon her.

The surprise seemed to be mutual. Ivien saw that three had bandages around their foreheads, and one had his left arm in a sling.

"They are some of the survivors of Panther City!" she thought. "If they are Murell Anton's friends they are enemies of mine."

Then she stepped forward to the water's edge, and in a firm voice accosted them:

"Friends or foes?"

"That depends," was the answer of the rough fellow who left the ranks. "We are the avengers of Panther City. Are you not one of the persons what told us that the Injuns war comin'?"

"I am."

"Then you don't like Gold Trigger? You are huntin' him?"

Ivien did not quail; the crisis was at hand.

"I hunt the last man who was concerned in the murder of my father!" she said firmly.

The leader of the survivors of Panther glanced at his men.

"She's one of the Death Angels," Ivien heard him say. "We can't go back on our oath just because she's a gal, an' purty as a peach."

"That's so, Jack!" was the response.

The next instant ten revolvers were drawn.

CHAPTER VII.

"HOLD ON, THAR!"

The speed of thought seemed to be possessed by the Sport's black horse.

Aida's effort to check him had not succeeded, and when too late the girl discovered that she had overestimated her powers.

But she still clung to the stout bridle-rein. To fall was to be trampled to death.

So she shut her eyes and held on with the tenacity of death itself. She was borne through the gulch at a rate of speed that took her breath, and rendered her faint. Beyond the gap the horse turned and began to ascend as if on the ground above the plain he would be safe from the arrows of the Indians.

"He will not run to the end of the world!" Aida comforted herself. "He will stop before long; if he does not he will fall exhausted."

But he continued on as if he was a stranger to exhaustion.

Murell Anton might be dead!

For an hour he had not stirred. One of his arms was thrown about the neck of his steed, but the wild black mane concealed his face from the girl.

Was he dead? After all, had the arrows of the Blackfeet snatched from her the great desire of her life, vengeance for the blood spilled far away in the metropolis of the Atlantic Coast?

The sun crept higher and higher; the horse went over the hills among which he had been traveling for some time, and at last Aida found herself upon the richest pasture spot she had ever seen.

Surely the horse would not neglect the breakfast spread out before his blood-shot eyes.

A cry of joy burst from Aida's throat when the animal came to a halt in the midst of this beautiful pasture valley, and she loosened her long and desperate hold.

But she could scarcely stand. More than once she almost fell to the ground; but the sight of the enemy still imprisoned in the saddle revived her. She could not forget for a moment that that man was Murell Anton, the Chief of the Order of the Black Cross.

Unmindful of his burden, Starwing began to enjoy the grass, and Aida, with a slender-bladed knife in her hand, crept forward.

She reached Murell Anton's side without difficulty and drew Starwing's mane aside.

What did she see that made her start? Was it the face of a dead man, with wide, staring, expressionless eyes?

On the contrary there was life in the orbs that greeted her.

Murell Anton looked like a man who is just emerging from a trance.

Aida stopped at the sight. It was unexpected, but not unpleasant.

The last of the Sports was alive and in her power.

"Murell Anton, don't you know me?" she said, stepping nearer.

"As if I could forget you!" he said, in a voice but little lifted above a hoarse whisper. "Last night you were in Panther City when the Blackfeet fell upon it like a pack of wolves; to-day, after my horse has carried me far beyond the yelling pack that fell upon Mountain Bill and me, I find you at my side, a knife in your hand. That knife, Aida Coress, is, I suppose, the blade of vengeance. Well, I am bound; I am powerless. Murell Anton is in your hands."

"You think me cowardly. From the day that I stepped upon the trail of vengeance I have taken advantage of no one. If you will exercise memory at this moment, Murell Anton, you will remember that of the eight men who have preceded you to the land of shadows, not one was cowardly assassinated."

"But they were so situated that they could not escape," he persisted.

"True! I had sworn that they must die. And so must you!"

"Tied to a horse and helpless?"

"No!"

The young avenger sprung forward as she uttered the monosyllable, and before the Sport could divine her intention, he felt his bonds yield, and a moment afterward he stood among the grass beside his horse.

"Thanks!" he said.

"Aha! the Indian arrows did not strike you!" Aida exclaimed, rather surprised to see the handsome figure of the Sport stand erect.

"No; they preserved me for you, I guess," he answered, with a smile, and before she could speak, he went on: "But I am wounded. Your agent failed to do his duty, although no blame is to be attached to him. We had a hunt for hearts in Panther City, and he almost reached mine. He acted fairly, as I thought at the time, and during the duel I struck him twice fairly in the breast. But, under his coat the dog wears a vest of armor, and when I fell, my knife was broken at the point."

Aida listened to Gold Trigger's short narration of the duel, and her mind went back to her late encounter with Pandey Roorback. No wonder now that the ball from her carbine did not stretch him lifeless on the plain.

"I was not aware that he was thus clothed when I sent him," she said in tones that convinced Murrell Anton that she uttered a truth. "But, there is no armor on me."

"None that I can see, at any rate," Murrell confessed, again smiling. "I could not see any on him, but my knife found it. Well, I'd like to meet him again. I am confident that that mummied casket which incloses his brains is not incased in armor."

"Then you have a desire?"

"Yes; to pay Pandey Roorback for the blow he dealt me."

"Is that all?"

The Sport's eyes glistened as he surveyed the faultless figure of the avenger from head to foot. He knew what the question meant.

"Think. Pandey Roorback sought you because we bound him with an oath," she continued. "We thought we were dying with the fever. He found us, helpless and friendless, almost in sight of our last quarry. We told him a part of our story, and commissioned him to be our avenger. Murrell Anton, that act almost killed me. I thought I was about to lose you forever—that, in sight of the victim, I was about to turn from the trail. Pandey had hardly vanished before we began to recover. Day after day we grew stronger, and when we were able to mount again we turned our faces toward your lair."

"After you had sent Old Bizness upon the death errand?" asked the Sport.

"Yes; we wanted to know that you were dead," she explained. "Ah! we suddenly discovered by a manifesto posted by the men of Panther that you still lived. Hope—vengeance, revived at the thought. The life-hunt was recommenced. We tried to save Panther in order to preserve your heart for our revenge. But you escaped—you and Mountain Bill, the man who would not betray you with a pistol at his breast. Now we stand face to face again—the first time in five years. Your horse rushed by me; I tried to

check him; he bore me hither. That is why I am here. Murrell Anton, have you got a pistol?"

Gold Trigger did not appear to know that Aida had concluded, for he seemed to be waiting for her to continue.

"I have told my story," she said impatiently. "I just asked you if you had a pistol?"

"When was I ever without such a friend?" he exclaimed.

"You had such a friend in New York," she reminded, bitterly. "Go and get your pistol. It is on your horse, I suppose."

"No; it is here!"

As the Sport spoke he drew an elegant revolver from his bosom and let it fall at his side.

"The pistol with the gold trigger!" exclaimed Aida. "Did it ever miss, Murrell?"

"Only once!"

"Do you know who stood before it then?"

A strange light leaped into the Sport's eyes.

"What! was it you, demoness?" he cried. "Sometimes I have suspicioned as much. But I fired hastily then; and it was dark, too. I do not blame the weapon for missing then, so much as I blame myself."

"I was there; so was Ivien. That night the eighth man left you, and you were the last of the nine. But we will try final conclusions now. See! I am armed."

In the girl's right hand was a revolver that looked more like a toy than a weapon of death.

"The rest had fair play; you the chief of all, shall not be an exception. For five years I have heard of the wonderful pistol-shooting of Gold Trigger, but only one year ago did I discover that he and Murrell Anton were identical. Now you have a living target who rejoices to stand before your deadly aim. I will step back five paces—thus. Are you ready?"

"I am always ready!"

"I will give the signal."

"Go on."

Looking into each other's faces the enemies stood in the luxuriant grass with their fingers on the triggers of the pistols at their sides.

The signal trembled on Aida's lips, and she was giving her weapon a firmer grip when a voice came down from the hills above to startle her, and to throw a new light of hatred into Gold Trigger's eyes.

"Hold on, thar!" was the sonorous intonation. "Ez I happen hyar so handy mebbe we'd better make it a three-handed game. By the jumpin' poker! I demand a new deal an' thet, too, when I hold the jack, ez ye kin see by lookin' up hayr. Lift the pistols an' I'll throw the last trump card, which ar' death!"

Instinctively Aida raised her eyes, and Gold Trigger, wheeling half-way round, looked over his shoulder.

On the summit of one of the hills that rose above the green valley appeared the man who had interrupted the fight.

He sat astride of a grotesque looking animal, between whose ears projected the lengthy rifle which he held against his shoulder.

His face was almost concealed by the dingy stock of the weapon; but the duelists knew him as Pandey Roorback.

CHAPTER VIII.

BRAVE AIDA.

THE would-be duelists stood as if transfixed to the spot where they had expected to spill each other's life-blood.

They no longer looked at one another; their eyes were fastened upon the man whose rifle seemed about to sever the brittle thread of existence.

Pandy Roorhack did not move a muscle.

"The villain seems to be spotting the girl," murmured the Sport. "Two weeks ago he was her avenger; now his rifle is turned against her. But, why should he protect me?"

And Aida thought.

"He is going to rescue Gold Trigger for some purpose. I am the target at which he aims."

The next moment the harsh voice of the elevated marksman came down over the rifle.

"Do you agree to separate?" it said. "I will hev no foolishness. Life is too dear to both of you to be frittered away by a little stubbornness when Pandy Roorback narvously touches the trigger. I give you one minute to turn yer backs upon each other. Murell Anton, yer hoss is waitin' for you. You ar' only ten miles from Bear River. Hev ye furgot what I told ye last night in Panther?"

"I never forget anything," flashed the Sport; but the next minute he turned upon Aida.

"If we refuse to obey that man we will never try final conclusions with each other," he said, calmly. "I counsel obedience for the present."

"Obey him," responded Aida. "We will meet again."

Murell Anton turned and walked toward his horse, which still enjoyed the nourishing grass. Aida followed him with eyes full of bitter disappointment.

The Sport threw himself upon his horse.

"Do ye know whar Bear River is?" Pandy demanded.

"Of course I do. You cannot tell me anything about the Northwest."

"A livin' geography, like myself," was the reminder.

As the Sport grasped the lines, he turned and waved his hand at the disappointed avenger.

"Have you no good-by for me, girl?" he said with a perplexing smile. "Few lovers are sent off thus sullenly. Oho! the last of the Sports never rode from woman without a kiss—*thus!*"

He threw her a kiss as he uttered the last word, and the girl bounded forward with a cry of rage.

"That insult seals your doom, Murell Anton!" she exclaimed, and her pistol for a moment covered the Sport.

"None o' thet!" came down from the man overhead.

But Aida did not heed.

The puff of smoke that leaped from her weapon was followed by a sharp report and the hat that covered the Sport's head went spinning to the ground.

"That's outrageous shooting, my little demoness," he laughed, as with the utmost nonchalance he leaped off to recover the hat. "By my lady's ring! you're sadly out of practice. Try again! here is the heart that you want."

"No! go away! I was hasty—hasty! I do not want your blood now. I will not take it. Content am I to contend for you with the man overhead. Good-by, Murell."

She lowered her pistol and turned her back upon the Sport, whose life she had sought but a moment before.

"You women will always have your own way," said Murell Anton. "Good-day, my lovely mistress. But, before I go, let me say seriously that if you value your life you must not follow the last brother of the Black Cross."

Aida heard but did not reply; her cheeks flushed at the words, and a wild light danced in her eyes; but, firm in her newly formed resolution she did not turn.

For several minutes she stood with averted face during which time she knew that the Sport had taken his departure, for the sound of retreating hoofs had greeted her ears.

When she turned it was to see a vacant spot where she had lately encountered her bitter foe. Starwing and his rider were gone.

Then she lifted her eyes to the hill above.

Pandy Roorback had also disappeared and Aida was the only occupant of the little grass-covered valley.

Without a horse, in that distant valley, the Death Angel was in no pleasant predicament. She had no means of knowing how far she had been dragged at Starwing's bit, but she knew that her surroundings were strange, and encountered now for the first time.

Where was Ivien?

It is not strange that at that moment Aida's thoughts should wander to her companion. They had been inseparable since the inauguration of that vengeance-hunt which had carried them to the death lands of the great Northwest; but now they were miles apart and ignorant of each other's condition.

Eager to be off, the girl surveyed the little valley. The sun was high in the heavens, the air, hot and close, seemed to scorch her cheeks, fevered anyhow, and she felt a sense of suffocation at her heart as she started forward.

"If I can climb to the highest peak I can see a way out of this," she said, suddenly grasping at the straw of hope that seemed to have been blown at her feet. "Courage, Aida Coress! No fainting while *he* lives! No halting while Ivien is lost."

The climbing of the rough brush-covered and pathless hills was no small feat for those young feet. But she did not halt until among the trees on the loftiest summit.

"Ha! Bear River!" was the exclamation that fell from her lips. "There is the land where my trail is to end!" and shading her eyes with her brier-torn hand, she gazed upon the far-off river which looked like a line of molten silver glittering in the sun.

The Bear River country was undoubtedly before this unnatural avenger. Now, if Ivien was at her side, she would keep her face toward it, nor turn away until the last success had been won.

As Aida gazed she seemed to become strong again. The sight of the far-away landscape revived her; to her eyes it was a paradise although it was tenanted by death.

Ten miles away? It did not seem half that distance.

When she went down the hill the sun was no longer at the meridian; the shadows of the trees were falling athwart the little valley.

All at once Aida stopped, and a moment later she found herself face to face with a formidable grizzly cub.

The animal had halted at sight of her, and his surprised eyes were ludicrous objects, but the girl saw nothing in them to excite merriment.

Swiftly she drew the revolver, but at the same time her knife glittered in her hand.

"I must retreat from this foe," she confessed to herself, and forthwith she began to walk away.

But the cub as if loth to let the girl depart in peace, moved forward, and exhibited unmistakable signs of fight.

He was more than half grown, and Aida saw that his claws were long and terribly sharp.

"If I must fight the brute I will shrink no longer!" and she came to a sudden halt. "Ah! how I miss my carbine now!"

That trusty weapon had been lost during her forced journey from the spot where she had tried to check the speed of Gold Trigger's horse, and she must needs depend on pistol and knife.

Taking a firm stand, with her pale but resolute face turned toward the cub, which continued to advance, Aida raised the pistol. At that moment the bear stopped as if to receive the fire.

For several seconds the hand of the girl avenger held the weapon steadily to her aim, and then touched the trigger.

At the report the grizzly fell back with a sharp growl, but almost immediately charged forward.

Again and again the pistol shots awoke the echoes of the lonely spot; but they did no damage, as the motions of the beast spoiled her aim.

All at once Aida threw the weapon aside and changed the knife to her right hand.

This action did not take place a moment too soon, for the cub rose suddenly on his hinder feet and sprung forward to the combat thus invited.

"Heaven help me!" ejaculated the girl at this critical juncture, and then as if seeking the combat she darted at the brute and while her left hand gripped his throat, she struck with all her might with the knife!

It was a blow that drove the blade beneath the thick hide of the young monster, for when she withdrew it, it no longer glistened in the sunlight, for it was bloody from hilt to point.

Then began the deadly battle.

The young bear, sorely wounded by the steel, threw his whole weight upon his antagonist, who was forced back despite the firm footing she had obtained.

Still the knife was plied with vigor, and the arm that ended among the fur at the cub's throat seemed clothed in steel. Aida's case was desperate; to fall where she fought was to lose Ivién, Murell Anton—life itself.

Inch by inch the whelp, rendered desperate

by his repeated wounds, forced the girl back. His hot breath was in her face, his horrid mouth, fringed by formidable teeth, looked like a cavern of death.

But Aida, with lips compressed, fought on—fought with feet firmly fixed until at last she was thrown back by a desperate onset, and went to the ground, the furious foe uppermost.

The knife broken in the fall still remained in the girl's possession; but scarce two inches of the blade were left.

Aida despaired; she dropped the useless weapon and caught at the cub's throat.

Instinctively a cry for assistance rung from her parched lips. But who was near enough to help her in that hour of dire necessity?

Help was at hand!

Suddenly the bear gave a yelp of pain and turned his head.

Aida had not heard the report of any firearm, but she knew that her foe had been struck.

There was an arrow in the young monster's side, and as the avenger caught a glimpse of the feathered shaft, the animal quivered and fell from her body.

A cry of joy was on Aida's lips as she leaped up.

But the next instant she started from the sight that met her gaze.

At the foot of the nearest hill stood a full-grown Blackfoot warrior, whose bow-string was still quivering against his red left hand.

Above him among the bushes a score of feathered heads were visible.

"I have fallen into the hands of the Philistines!" was the girl's thought.

This seemed true, for the slayer of the cub rushed forward, and lifting the girl from the ground, held her up in triumph to his companions.

"Aha! white girl tell pale-faces that the Blackfeet come!" he shouted. "They hunt for Gold Trigger, but they find the girl that save him. Good! good!"

The savage crowd now surrounded the young avenger.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked.

What?

Did not the mad, flashing eyes and the fiendish yells answer her?

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE BEAR RIVER COUNTRY.

"I AM here! Now let the wolves that hunt the heart of the chief of the Black Cross stand forth!"

Murell Anton had dismounted from his handsome horse, and stood erect, his head above the well-worn saddle, and his arm resting carelessly on the animal's midnight mane.

He was in the midst of the Bear River country, for the stream that gave that death land its name flowed at his feet. There were numerous hills around him, but none were lofty: if it had not been night, his heart might have enjoyed with his eyes, the freedom that his surroundings suggested and the scenery on either hand.

We left him riding from the spot where Pandý

Roorback had interrupted a duel which on his part at least, would have been fought to the death. The old hunter had disappeared from his vision as silently as he had betaken his lank anatomy from Aida's sight.

Gold Trigger had not attempted to find his enemy, but had kept his face turned resolutely to the Bear River country where he believed they were to meet again.

Alone in that strange land, and hunted by enemies as relentless as death, the handsome Sport seemed to be planning for the future.

"He said he would meet me here," he cried madly, as impatience parted his lips. "Maybe it was braggadocio. I am here, but he, the pusillanimous coward, keeps his distance. Pandy Roorback, you're a liar from the ground up!"

There was no response; the sentence echoed among the hills of Bear River, and came back to tell the hunted Sport that his enemy was not near.

"It is only a question of time," he continued. "There were nine of us. I am the sole survivor. My boots are on. I am never going to pull them off. I intend to die as the boys died—with their brogans on. Mountain Bill promised to die with me, but the arrows of the Blackfeet found his life-box. Gods! how he turned and charged them; how like a thunderbolt of death he fell among the fiends, and all to divert attention from me! I looked back. I saw him right in their midst. Then the arrows struck Starwing; they maddened him, and I was forced from the scene. All my friends have died before me. Bill was the last."

The Sport ceased abruptly, for his quick ears had detected a sound, and with his gold-triggered pistols ready for the enemy, he leaned forward and listened.

"Down, Starwing!" he whispered, and the next instant the trained horse sunk to the ground, where he lay perfectly motionless.

The animal formed an excellent barricade, and the Sport with eyes raised above the saddle held his breath and watched.

He soon caught sight of several figures darker than the shadows that covered the ground, figures seemingly endowed with life.

"The wolves keep the scent well," he muttered. "They have run the quarry down; but the blood of the hunters will stain the fresh grass of the Bear River country."

He counted six crawling forms as he watched, but all at once they halted and came together as if for consultation.

"Come on! I want you!" he hissed.

As if in response to his menace, a figure separated itself from the body, and came forward again. How eagerly Gold Trigger watched it as it neared his horse, creeping on all-fours like a wolf. But it was a human wolf, as he well knew.

The movements of the hunter—a Blackfoot Indian as Gold Trigger surmised—were cautious and snail-like. He broke no leaf in the crawl; but his figure came straight forward with the noiseless cunning of the fox. All at once Gold Trigger relinquished the pistol in his left hand, and raised his body as if about to spring upon the crawler.

His chest expanded as he waited; his eyes

seemed to emit sparks of fire. He saw nothing but the dark creeper before him, and appeared to be calculating the exact location of the throat.

At length the crawler reached the horse, and, as he lifted his head as if to make an inspection, the Sport's left hand darted at his throat, and closed like a vise on the captured weasand!

The next moment the crawler was jerked across the saddle, and the muzzle of Murell Anton's pistol came in contact with his forehead.

"One cry! one sign!" was hissed in his ears, "one motion, even, and I'll give you a through ticket to death's valley. Now talk; but tone down your tongue. How many are you?"

Murell Anton loosened his gripe a little, but kept the cold muzzle of the pistol against the forehead of his captive.

"What! can't you talk?"

There was no response; the man had already been choked to the borders of insensibility.

"Talk or die!"

The lips of the captive tried to speak.

"I—I—by the great horn spoon!"

"Mountain Bill!"

Gold Trigger leaped to his feet as the exclamation fell from his lips.

"Hello, boys!" he shouted to the figures crouched a short distance away. "I'm here in the flesh, and ready to lead you wherever you want to go. Come up and give Gold Trigger your fists. Bill has an attack of sore throat which might have proved fatal."

The phantoms sprung up and darted forward with coarse ejaculations of joy, while Mountain Bill, assisted to his feet by his pard, did nothing but stare at the man upon whom he had crawled with a life in his hand.

The men of Panther crowded around their leader and overwhelmed him with congratulations.

"We took you fer thet onery skunk thet give you the knife," said Mountain Bill. "His trail war lost a piece back, and when we saw you hyar we thought we had 'im!"

"Then Pandy Roorback is here," said Gold Trigger, while his eyes sent out a light of mingled hate and fiendish joy. "The meeting can not be long delayed. But you, Bill—you escaped?"

"Wal, yes," was the reply. "By hook an' crook, I managed to come outen the melee right side up with keer. When I go under, Murell, 'twill be with you; mark that in your ledger. I fell in accidentally with the boys hyar; they didn't know I war livin', an I war thinkin ov them as saints. Jest look at 'em, Murell; the others are back a piece. Thar ar' sixteen in all. When the rest come up, you'll see the purtiest little tiger ever captured in this kentry."

"A tiger, Bill!" asked the Sport, eagerly.

"Thet's what you'd 'a' called 'er arter the time they hed in gettin' her," was the answer. "I didn't see the fun; but I come up as the boys war about to graft her to a sycamore. She's one ov the individuals what hev been lookin' fur you since—wal, fur a long time."

"What! Aida?"

"No; the other one."

Murell Anton started, and his soft hand stole into Mountain Bill's rough palm.

"And you saved her life, Bill?"

"Mebbe I did. War thet right?"

"Yes! I owe you my life for that deed."

Mountain Bill's eyes dilated, and he withdrew his hand in astonishment.

"I knowed you didn't hate 'em alike, but I never thought—"

"There! we will say no more about that, Bill. Let us meet the rest of the boys."

The Sport started forward with an eagerness which he had not displayed in a long time.

"Where are the boys?" he asked, turning suddenly upon Bill. "I am going—I know not wherel"

"Thet's jist what I thought. Hyar, to the right, cap'n; we'll meet the boys over the hills whar it is lighter."

As the Sport went forward in the midst of the survivors of Panther, he looked at his friends. They were eight in number, stern, stalwart, muscular fellows, a majority of whom carried on their persons the unhealed wounds of the battle of Panther City.

"Halt! hyar come the boys!" suddenly said Mountain Bill. "Now you will see one ov them avengers."

He glanced at Murell as he spoke, and saw him nerve himself for the expected meeting.

The next moment a body of mounted men came into view, and were greeted by the Sport and his comrades.

Gold Trigger's eyes wandered through the little cavalcade, but were doomed to exhibit signs of bitter disappointment.

"Where is the girl?" he demanded, fixing his eyes upon the leader of the band.

"Oh, she got so infernally troublesome that we adorned a cottonwood with 'er about three miles back. She was a seraph, cap'n, but—"

Gold Trigger's hand went up, a revolver cracked, and the brute rolled from the saddle with the sentence unfinished.

There was a bullet in his brain!

"Come, Bill—you and I!" said the Sport to his pard, and the next minute the twain were riding southward as fast as horseflesh could carry them.

"I allus said he didn't hate 'em alike," said one of the men of Panther. "Thet proves it!" and he cast his eyes upon the dead man lying at his horse's feet.

CHAPTER X.

A VULNERABLE HEAD.

"LET 'im go on! He'll find the gal dead enough, an' when he comes to his senses he'll thank us fur treatin' 'er to a hempen collar. By Jove! didn't he drop poor Sam sudden? I saw devil-light flash in his eyes when Sam began to tell the story ov the hangin', an' held my breath. Ef I'd 'a' been nigh enough I'd 'a' pinched Sam er giv' 'im the wink; but I couldn't do neither one. Wal, we kin plant 'im; thet's all we kin do."

The speaker dismounted as he finished, and bent over the man who had fallen before Gold Trigger's bullet.

His example was quickly followed by half a score of his companions, and with tender hands and looks of pity the dead man was carried to one side of the rough road, where he was laid on the rich grass.

The hoofs of Gold Trigger and Mountain Bill's horses no longer sounded in the men's ears, and they fell at once to work to make a shallow grave for their comrade.

This duty was performed in a short space of time, and without any funeral oration. Shady Sam, as the unfortunate was called, was lowered into his last resting-place.

During the interment, a change had come to the face of every one, and while the heavy boots kicked the loose earth over their companion, more than one eye filled with looks of hatred, if not revenge.

"Boys," suddenly said one, "when did we elect Gold Trigger our cap'n?"

"We never did!"

"Thet's what I was thinkin'; but Shady called 'im by thet name jest afore he teched the gold trigger. He will find the gal dead; that's sart'in. He will come back mad—I know 'im!—an' then we who treated her to the rope will hev to stand before 'im an' be shot down like sheep."

"Not if we kin lift a pistol, Tom!"

"But we don't want to do thet. He ar' the best man in the Northwest. Thar's no discount on Murell Anton, an' then the whole world wants his blood. I fear one can't lift a pistol ag'in' him. If thar's a man among us what kin, let 'im hold up his hand."

Not a hand went up.

The hunted Sport had a strong hold on the hearts of the men of Panther.

"We can't 'cover' him," returned the speaker who was probably the youngest member of the band. "Somehow or other he holds the biggest kind o' mortgage on our hearts. I say let us go away an' attend to the business. We have vengeance to work out. Panther lies in ashes; the best boys thet ever tossed a kerd, or handled a bowie, lie whar the Blackfeet left 'em. An' whar Whisky Dick's hotel stood is a board what tells us to whom we kin, if we like, credit all our troubles."

"To that mean skunk, Pandey Roorback!" said several listeners at once.

"Thet's the name! the man what hunted fur Murell's heart with a knife—the hound that brought the red demons to Panther. Kin we furgit 'im?"

"Never!"

"Then let us leave Gold Trigger and Bill to themselves; that's my motto. Ef we stay hyar till they come back we'll hev to lift our hands ag'in' him. He don't hate the gals alike, an' we bring the wrong one."

A moment's silence followed the utterance of the last word.

It was evident that the speaker had impressed his bronzed listeners.

"Must we keep always from Murell?" asked one, at length.

"No; only fur the present. Ef he gits into a tight place we'll help him out, ov course. When the mad fever leaves 'im, we kin hunt our foes an' his'n together."

"That's the doctrine. We can't stay hyar, fur they hev found the gal by this time, an' they'll soon be comin' back with revenge in their eyes, and death in their hands."

"Bill, too?"

"Ov course! ain't they pards? If Gold Trigger commanded, Mountain Bill would drop his brother. Now let's leave this graveyard."

The next moment the stalwart figures of the men of Panther vaulted into saddle, and preparations were made for a start.

"Now for the death-hunt. We hev turned our backs to Panther. Pandy Roorback, ef you don't take care of number one, thar'll be a hoss without a rider in this kentry."

These words were greeted by a shout of vengeance which was still echoing among the hills of the Bear River country, when the sharp intonation of a rifle startled every one, and the man who had just spoken went headlong over his horse's ears.

"Great Jehu! Injuns! Injuns!" cried one of the men, and the next instant the mountaineers leaped to the ground and placed their horses' bodies between them and the spot from whence the shot had come.

"Call me an Injun ag'in, an' I'll come down an' wallop the hull kit an' passel ov ye!" cried a rough uncultured voice, as a man came into view about one hundred yards away. "I couldn't let ye go, men of Panther, without the compliments ov yours truly, Pandy Roorback, *alias* Old Bizness. When I left yer city, you said thet I should be hunted down. Well, I begun to fear thet you hed furgotten yer duty, so I went into the Blackfoot kentry, killed a few Injuns, an' hed 'em charged to Panther. I feel lost when somebody ain't huntin' me, an' when the chase lags, I allus stir it up like I hev jest done. What might be the name ov the corpse? I ginerally try to keep my death records straight."

The men of Panther did not reply; they stood behind their horses on whose backs their deadly rifles rested. Their mad eyes were fastened on the uncouth figure which they had recognized from the first word.

Pandy Roorback was not astride of his homely horse, but stood six-feet-six in his dirty boots, and firmly planted on *terra firma*.

His victim lay at full length on the ground where he had fallen with the unerring bullet of his slayer in his brain, while Old Pandy held the death-rifle carelessly, and, to all appearances, unloaded across his long arm.

"Drop 'im!" was the low command that passed among the mountain men. "Let the man who holds a bead on the old fellar's heart avenge Black Reynolds's death. Who's got the call on 'im?"

"I hev!" said one of the men.

"Then let 'im hev it."

The cheek of the man of Panther, who felt that he had the life of Pandy Roorback on his easy trigger, crept closer to his rifle-stock, and the next instant the leaden pellet was loosed.

The marksman would have bet his life on his aim; but the ejaculations of chagrin and disappointment that immediately assailed his ears told him that he would have lost the wager.

Old Bizness stood in his tracks, apparently

unharméd; but those who had watched closely were ready to aver that he had staggered back a pace as if struck by something.

The face of the man who had fired the shot was white. Under other circumstances he would have been the laughing-stock of his companions.

"Man or devil, will no bullets kill you?" he cried.

"They moight an' then they moightn't!" was the answer, as a sickly smile overspread the sallow face of the tall man. "It depends on the condition of the powder."

"That's a lie, boys!" grated the mountaineer, glancing at his companions. "I never missed a man at a hundred yards before—never! Say, didn't we find the p'int broken off o' Gold Trigger's knife after the duel in Panther?"

The avengers opened their eyes; a new light or the solution of a mystery seemed to be dawning upon them.

"By George, ye're right!" was the answer. "I saw the blade myself. Now what d'ye think did it?"

"Armor!" was the sententious reply.

"Then a ball in the head will drop 'im."

"Ov course!"

The man who had fired the shot straightened his figure.

"Kin I try yer heart the second time, Pandy?" he called to the old man.

"Sartainly. I'm the most accommodatin' piece ov humanity north ov Mason an' Dixon's line. Now, sail in; hyar's the hull life-chest ov Old Bizness at yer disposal," and the dark hand of the speaker struck his breast with much braggadocio.

"His head, Tom! draw a long bead an' a good 'un," whispered a man at the marksman's side. "It isn't much bigger than a coon's noggin, but, with Reynolds at yer feet, you ought to hit a gold dollar!"

"I'll hit 'im!" was the low reply.

The silence that followed the last word seemed palpable, and the rough men of Panther City heard the throbbing of their own hearts as their gaze wandered from Tom, their comrade, to his living target and back again.

Would he never fire? If he held much longer, his nerves would fail him, and the second shot prove as barren of results as the first.

But all at once the stillness was broken; Tom had touched the trigger at last.

Simultaneously with the report, the gaunt slayer reeled with a piercing cry and dropped to his knees.

"Hit! avenged!" broke from the lips of the mountaineers. "No! by Jove! he's up ag'in! There! quick! he is recovering! He'll escape us at last!"

Pandy Roorback had recovered his footing, but with a mighty effort.

The eager avengers were leaping to saddle again, but this time to prevent his escape.

They saw him reel toward a clump of bushes at his right, and all at once he fell among them and disappeared.

With a yell and a cheer the men dashed forward.

A minute's gallop brought them to the spot, but where they had expected to find the scotch-

ed snake, they saw some drops of blood and the hoof-prints of a horse.

Then followed some round cursing as the disappointed men gazed about them.

"Wal, we've l'arned one thing; the old demon's head is vulnerable," said one.

"Yes, but the lesson cost us Reynolds. We'll plant 'im first, an' then—"

"No haltin' till we bullet-bore thet head!"

That was the sentiment of every one.

CHAPTER XI.

A NEW TRAIL.

MURELL ANTON, the Sport, and Mountain Bill urged their horses forward at a break-neck speed.

Fear, eagerness, and rage were strangely commingled in Murell's eyes.

"All this ridin' is for nothin'," muttered the pard. "We'll find a piece ov lifeless beauty when we git to the sycamore, and when we go back he'll cool down considerably, though jest now he'd empty the pistols among the boys ef they war hyar."

The country over which they rode was rough, but the good horses did not spare their powers, and ere long a cry fell from Gold Trigger's lips.

"She's thar yet, waitin' fur 'im!" said Bill, looking forward eagerly. "He knew whar the tree war, as ef the boys hed told 'im. It's the same old tree thet the Bear River Vigilantes used so often last summer."

At that moment the Sport's steed plunged ahead of his companion, for the keen spurs had struck him cruelly, and Bill saw Gold Trigger draw rein beneath the wide-spreading arms of an ancient sycamore.

"Nothin' but a rope!" ejaculated the pard, as all color left his cheeks. "They hung 'er—that's certain, but somebody's been ahead ov us."

By this time he was at Gold Trigger's side; the Sport was holding the noose up for his inspection with his right hand.

"I see it—empty!" said Mountain Bill. "That's better than findin' a corpse in it."

"Do you think so?"

"I do—pardon me, Murell. I'm afraid thet I'm prone to furgit jest who filled that loop. Ef she war thet other one—"

"There!" said the Sport, his eyes flashing as he lifted his hand to silence his comrade. "She is not Aida. Do not impute to her that terrible desire for revenge that controls her sister's life. Ivién Coress, blood hunter though she be, has a heart. She is not a human tigress—she is not merciless."

The Sport spoke with a depth of feeling that made the single, sun-browned listener stare, and as the last sentence was dropping from his lips, he sprung to the ground. Mountain Bill followed his example.

For several moments the twain searched the vicinity of the death-tree in silence; and when the pard straightened himself he found Gold Trigger contemplating him.

"Well, Bill, what have you discovered?" asked the Sport.

"Injun tracks!"

"So have I."

"Blackfeet?"

"The same scarlet devils, no doubt, whose hands are stained a darker hue by the blood of the men of Panther."

Bill ground his teeth till they cracked.

"They were ahead of us. What do you think of her now?"

"She war alive when they took her down!" replied Bill. "Ef she hed been dead we'd hev found 'er hyar with some uv her purty ha'r minus."

The Sport, by a nod, coincided in Bill's opinion, and his gaze wandered toward the long line of bluish hills that fringed the far-away horizon. Beyond their tips was the country of the Blackfeet.

"Which way did they go after they cut her down?" he asked.

"To'ards home," answered Bill.

Gold Trigger was silent for a moment, during which time, by one great stride he had carried himself within arm's reach of the pard.

"Bill, we're going to separate here," he said, slowly, and with emphasis, as his hand fell upon the rough diamond's shoulder. "The boys are waiting for me back yonder where I left them. Go back and join them. I say this—I, your old pard. I want you to stay in the Bear River country till I come back. That man whose blood I want, because he shed mine, will call me a coward if nobody stays here to tell him that Murell Anton has not left for good. You are the man to do this."

Mountain Bill did not answer.

"An' you, Murell?"

"Oh, I am going to seek my fortune," he said with a smile, and a careless toss of his head.

"Be keerful! death is sometimes a fellar's fortin'!"

"I know it, Bill; but I'll not accept it so long as the golden trigger works."

"I am to go back to the boys?"

"Yes."

"They may be r'iled ag'in' ye because you dropped Sam."

"I'll vouch for them. They know me; and when they hear from your lips that I am gone away, they will breathe freer than they breathe at this moment. Remember! throw yourself in Pandy Roorback's path. Tell him that I am coming back to fight him—that the last of the Sports will give him a fair show for his white ally."

Murell had dropped Bill's hand with a fervent pressure and was walking to his horse.

The next second he was in the saddle.

"But what ef, after all, you shouldn't come back?" asked the pard. "Death ar' one ov them certainties what humanity can't control no more than you can out-talk a woman."

"Bill, look at me! I have something to bring me back to these parts. And I swear a solemn oath that despite the hunters of hearts—despite the powers that be above and below—I will come back to Bear River; there!"

"Thet kinder settles the matter, Murell. But be keerful; them Injuns have got a good start ov you; they're mighty nigh them blue hills by this time; they'll take you over, sure."

"I am prepared to follow them to the doors of their lodges!"

Mountain Bill saw the Sport's hand disappear beneath his coat and produce a piece of paper.

This he unfolded and threw one leg across the saddle for a writing table.

The eyes of the pard followed him as he bent forward and wrote rapidly these words:

"TO PANDY ROORBACK.

"Duty calls me away for a short time. Take good care of your health for I am coming back to fight you honorably to the bitter end. The next time my knife will not break."

To this document written in legible characters which could be read from a considerable distance, Murell Anton signed his name, after which act he tossed it to his companion.

"Stick it to that tree!" he said. "It is the most prominent landmark in these parts, and I'll warrant that he will see it soon enough. Now, good-by."

The Sport turned his horse suddenly and struck him with the spurs as if he was eager to leave the presence of the man who was loth to remain behind.

Bill watched him until in the hazy distance he was lost to sight, then, with a series of grumbling sentences, he turned to affix the notice to the tree.

Such a thing as tacks the mountaineer did not possess, and so after several minutes of vain attempts to fasten the paper to the hard wood by means of wooden pegs, sharpened by his knife, he lost all patience, and suddenly drove his dirk into the tree.

"Thar! he'll know by thet thet Mountain Bill subscribes to the subjeck matter ov the dockerment!" he cried, surveying the knife as it quivered in the paper with a grim smile of satisfaction. "I war goin' to add my name to the paper, but the bowie will do fur name, hand an' seal. An' when you read it, Pandie, jest cast one lovin' thought to'ards the subscriber."

The gentle breeze fluttered the ends of the notice as Mountain Bill mounted his horse.

"Back to the boys! thet war his command. But what ef I took a notion to disobey 'im fur the first time in my life?" Bill was looking toward the distant hills. "What ef he needed a guard'in angel whar he ar' goin'? an' what ef thet seraph ought to be his old pard, Bill? By the jumpin' Jingo! I can't stay hyar. I wouldn't be his pard ef I did. He's goin' to take a gal. what wants his blood, away from the Injuns. He acts like a feller what had a hull swarm ov bees in his hat. An' I said I would stay hyar to tell Pandie Roorback thet he would come back—which would be an orthodox lie. Fur ef he goes alone over them blue hills he'll find more wolves than he can tackle. He may cuss me—he may shoot me, but I'm Mountain Bill—I'm his old pard. I wouldn't be human ef I didn't break my word an' foller him. So hyar goes!"

A minute later a gallant roan, bearing a stalwart, dark-faced man, was dashing toward the far-away ridge.

"They call me a devil, them as know me," muttered the rider. "Wal, mebbe I am one; but I'm goin' to be Murell's guardi'n speerit, all the same. I love 'im, ef he isn't perfection. Me an' him ar' pards!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE HAND OF FATE.

WHILE the faces of Murell Anton and Mountain Bill are turned to the country of the Blackfeet, let us return to one of our characters whom we left in a precarious situation.

If the reader has already guessed, as he doubtless has, that we refer to Aida, we will inform him that his surmises are correct ones, and proceed.

We left the avenging girl in the hands of a band of Indians, one of whom saved her from the teeth of the cinnamon cub, at the moment when victory had declared in favor of the young monster.

The capture was unexpected, but not disagreeable on that account to the Blackfeet, all of whom had taken part in the destruction of Panther City. Aida, as we have said, found herself lifted into full view of the yelling crowd by a strong pair of scarlet arms, and heard the fiends charge her with having warned the ill-fated village.

Brave as she was, she shut her eyes and shuddered.

"I am to die like a dog by their hatchets with my mission unfulfilled!" she said. "Here ignominiously ends the death vendetta. Oh, for a moment's freedom with a good weapon at my disposal! I would not die easily, as dies the sheep in the slaughter-pen!"

But she was firmly held by her captor and preserver, and when she opened her eyes she was surprised to see every hatchet resting quietly in their owners' belt.

"White girl go to Blackfoot land," said the young warrior. "Girl never been there, eh?"

"No; I have never been there," replied Aida.

"She see young white chief up there: mebbe him save her."

A sarcastic grin overspread the speaker's face as he uttered the last sentence, but the girl did not reply.

"A white man among the Blackfeet?" she thought; "then I will not be wholly friendless in that death-land. But I see that they are going to take good care that the white chief whoever he be shall not save me. Oh, Ivién, wherever you are, may heaven pity and preserve you!"

Ten minutes later the Sport's beautiful enemy found herself in the midst of the warrior band, whose horses whinnied joyfully at intervals as they dashed along as if they knew that they were going home.

Her own steed was securely linked to a horse on either side by means of a strong lariat which passed around his neck, and a small rope encircled her waist and reached to the wrist of the young brave on her right to which it was fastened.

Thus secured Aida was borne swiftly along, constantly guarded besides by the keen eyes of the scarlet braves. The capturing party consisted of sixty warriors, several of whom bore fresh wounds on their persons and these in particular watched the girl with eyes that gleamed with hatred, and ready at any time to punish the slightest effort of escape.

As she rode along she had time for reflection;

but the girl avenger found herself wondering about the fate in store for her.

The hills which looked so far away from the point of her capture rapidly became distinct, and as the sun went down she found herself descending their western slopes in the midst of her captors.

She had passed the barrier; she was in Indian-dom!

Longer and longer grew the shadows, and cooler the breeze as the red squadron advanced; but at last the girl saw that the tiresome journey was about to end.

"Look!" said her captor, pointing forward. "Yonder is where the Blackfeet build their wigwams. The white chief is there."

The white chief again! Aida started. Was this mysterious individual white like herself?

The question would soon be solved. She would be patient and wait.

The next minute she found herself surrounded by countless lodges whose grotesque symmetry and color looked ghostly in the waning light. For the first time the girl avenger was in an Indian village, not one where the white mingled with the red-men, but one whose every scarlet inhabitant had sworn eternal enmity to a pale-face.

And yet this place possessed a white chief! Strange! Aida could not drive the thought from her mind.

The band did not announce its return to the population. Its members seemed anxious to enter without any demonstration, and at the shadows of the first lodges Aida was quietly lifted from her horse and borne swiftly away by the two young Blackfeet who had guarded her vigilantly the whole journey.

When she was released from their arms she found herself in a singular apartment which she knew to be the interior of a wigwam but one of some note.

"White girl no move—keep still!" said one of the Indians. "If she try to get out she run ag'in' a knife. If she be good captive, she see the white chief by-'n-by."

Always the white chief.

The avenger was left alone in the darkened room. The Indians, departing, had drawn the curtains close, and fastened them by means of sinewy ropes.

The very silence of death fell around the girl, and unable to endure it, she fell back, to alight on a cot of skins, where she began to review the startling circumstances that had brought her to that place.

"A few hours ago I stood face to face with Murell Anton, now I am here, a doomed captive among several thousand bloodthirsty Indians. Oh, Heaven, shall my life-quest end here?"

And the echo said in startling and distinct accents, "here!"

Aida sprang erect as if she had heard a human voice, and for several seconds she stood in the gathering gloom, hearing nothing but the beating of her own heart.

"It is false!" she cried, at last. "It was but an echo, and it lied. I am not going to perish here—not while lives that man—my last enemy—not while Murell Anton breathes the air of Heaven!"

Aida lifted her hand as she repeated this vow, and a moment later, yielding to the demands of nature, she returned to the cot, upon which she stretched herself with a sigh.

One by one the stars came out and looked down upon the Blackfoot town, and the silvery ray of moonlight that stole into the white girl's wigwam fell upon a beautiful face which looked all innocence and peace.

Deep and dreamless was that long slumber; but all at once a wild cry that echoed throughout the village like the scream of the jungle leopard, startled the sleeper and carried her from the cot.

"I did not dream it—no! it was real—that piercing cry!" she ejaculated in accents that betokened fright. "A man cut to the heart would scream thus! I am certain that a knife has been at work."

Aida was at the door of the wigwam and her hands were trying to make an aperture through which she might look out. She toiled with all her strength, and all at once the stubborn sinews yielded as if an unseen knife had severed them and the scene without lay before her eyes.

But what did she see?

Not far away stood three lodges so close together that the girl might have imagined a connection between them. They looked weird in the moonlight, for their curtains were closely drawn, and Aida found herself wholly contemplating them.

But suddenly something that hugged the ground like a crouching dog came into view between the lodges. Aida was quick to associate it with the cry which had wakened her.

"It is not an Indian dog, but a dog's master!" she said, as the object rose and stood against the bleached side of one of the wigwams. "Ah! I trust I am not the object of his hate to-night!" and she drew the curtains together with hasty hands.

But still her eyes remained fixed on the figure, which stood some time in view and then disappeared magically in the smallest lodge.

"Thanks!" Aida said, relieved. "I wonder if such tableaux are of nightly occurrence in Indian-land? But what does that mean?—move Indians on all fours?"

There were more crawling figures in the moonlight, and Aida saw twenty or more form a cordon around the three wigwams. In the hands of each was the strong elk-horn bow of the Blackfoot, and as all rose simultaneously, the muscled arms brought the feathered shaft to the ear. The head of the long barbs were directed at the wigwam beyond whose portals the first Indian had disappeared.

All at once a loud cry rose from the throats of the red archers and Aida held her breath.

What would the surrounded savage do?

Would he come boldly out and face the sharp arrows ready to pierce his heart? or would he remain where he was and be killed anyhow?

Suddenly—so unexpected, indeed, that the breathless girl started back with a cry—the curtains of the little lodge were flung apart, and a figure stepped majestically into the moonlight.

At the same time two arms went upward, and a brace of Blackfeet reeled with death-cries from the powder light that flashed in their very faces.

Again and again, with terrible steadiness and precision, that Indian stood and killed!

The Blackfeet fell before his weapons like wheat before a reaper, but his victory was of short duration.

Aida, as she gazed, saw the others recover; she saw them bound forward with cries of vengeance, saw the death arrows once more drawn against the slayer's breast, and then—

With a loud shout of recognition, she bounded from the lodge, and the next moment the bewildered Indians saw a beautiful white girl shielding their enemy's heart with her faultless figure!

"He is mine!" she cried. "Vengeance has given him to me. I have not followed him for years to lose him by your arrows. You have no right to the blood of Murell Anton, whatever he may have done to you. It is mine—mine!"

As for the person to whom the merciless avenger clung, astonishment filled his eyes, and as he looked down into her face, his lips parted, to murmur her name.

"Aida! Aida! Fate is determined to bring us together," he said. "But I will baffle it—you! Stand aside! I am desperate. Murell Anton, the Sport, is going to die with his boots on!"

He tore her from him as he uttered the last word; he flung her away with the maddest of oaths; and the next moment he stepped forward almost to the very tips of the Blackfoot arrows, and tore open the garments that covered his breast.

"Shoot! Indian dogs!" he cried. "Let fly your infernal shafts and cheat that girl out of the life she has hunted for years. I am ready! Oh, you sneaking curs, you're afraid to shed the blood of Gold Trigger. I never spared one of your race—never!"

But not an arrow left a scarlet hand, and Murell Anton, glancing at Aida, the hunter, caught a gleam of triumph in her eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WHITE CHIEF.

WE well know the quest that brought the hunted Sport into the village of the Blackfeet.

The trail of Ivien's rescuers, if, indeed, they had saved her alive from the brutal vengeance of the men of Panther, had led him over the hills and down among the dirty lodges of his people's foes.

We left Mountain Bill, the rough diamond, not many miles in the rear, having disobeyed the command to remain in the Bear River country for the purpose of acquainting Pandey Roorback if he should encounter him, with Gold Trigger's intention of returning.

But while the Pard was galloping after the Sport, startling scenes were occurring between Old Bizness and the Panther City worthies. These scenes we have already witnessed.

We have said that Ivien's trail had guided Murell Anton to the Blackfoot capital.

Was this true?

One hour after Aida's arrival a body of Indians, whose horses were well blown, reached the outskirts of the town and quickly dismount-

ed. From the back of a beautiful black stud a stalwart young buck lifted what appeared the inanimate form of a girl whose face was pale, but wondrously lovely in the starlight that fell upon it.

Below the faultless chin, on the swan-like throat, was a dark line that looked like the marks of a rope. It told the shuddering story of the execution of lynch law, but where were the hands that would encircle such a pretty neck with the death cord?

Having taken the yielding captive from the horse, the buck bore her rapidly toward a cluster of lodges, the curtains of one of which he parted and entered. Darkness reigned supreme beyond the primitive threshold; but the Indian deposited Ivien—for such is the identity of his burden—on a heap of skins, and almost immediately withdrew.

Once outside, he locked the curtain-door by means of an arrow which he took from a quiver at his back, and stole back to the spot where he had left his companions.

Aida and Ivien were both in the Indian capital, but dreamless of each other's presence.

And while the one slept, and the other tossed restlessly and pain-racked in the gloom of the wigwam, a man was creeping noiselessly upon a solitary Indian beyond the suburbs of the town.

The face of the creeper was white, and not far away, hidden by a hill, stood the horse which had carried him tirelessly north all through the long day.

It was Murell Anton.

His crawl upon the unsuspecting Blackfoot resembled the death crawl of the serpent upon the hare.

All at once he stopped, braced himself for a spring, and then with a half-muffled cry of triumph threw himself upon the brave.

A blow, the glitter of a knife, half-covered by a dark stain, the sinking of a half-naked figure to the ground, and the disguise for which the Sport had crawled two hundred yards was at his disposal.

Half an hour later the figure that went toward the village from the spot where the victory just described took place, looked like that of a veritable Blackfoot brave; but beneath the hunting-frock two revolvers hung ready for instant use.

And the trigger of each was of pure gold!

Let us go back to Ivien.

Amid the gloom of the lodge she seemed to wake from the most hideous of dreams; but gradually the truth dawned upon her senses.

Again she encountered the men of Panther by the little stream, where she had stopped to quench her raving thirst; again she saw them rush upon her, their fingers upon the trigger, and mad hatred in their dark eyes; again she went through the farce of a trial which they gave her beneath the sycamore, and, as she thought, she almost felt the horrid cord tightening about her throat again!

"Why should I thank these Indians who saved me?" she exclaimed. "Better, perhaps, had I perished on the tree."

Suddenly a noise like that occasioned by the drawing of a rough stick through some stubborn

fabric, roused the girl, and she saw the curtains of the wigwam drawn apart.

Between her and the stars appeared a head which, from the first, riveted her attention. She was confident that a pair of eyes were fastened upon her as she lay on the skins eagerly looking and holding her breath.

"Not here! Can I have missed the teepee?" said a voice whose sound almost caused the girl to spring forward. "This is Black Mane's lodge; but she, the girl, is not here! Strange!"

"I am here!" were the words that made the face at the door fall back. "Who can you be who speak my language among the lodges of the Blackfeet?"

Ivien was at the door of the lodge now, and her eyes, full of amazement, were fixed upon a face as white and as startled as her own.

"Great heavens! you are one of my race!" she went on. "Where did you come from? and why do you wear the garb of the Indians?"

"I am white, but I am Artolah, a Blackfoot chief," was the response. "Did you ever hear of me at the South?"

"No. Until this moment I was not aware of your existence."

Ivien could not take her eyes from the face and figure before her, and plainly visible in the starlight.

The former was fair, young and almost faultless in contour; the latter of agile mold, and full of graceful curves. The Indian garb showed it off to advantage.

"You still stare at me as if wondering whether I am really white or not," continued the youth—for boy he was. "Let me convince you. Six years ago I was Harry Ruthven; to-day I am the boy chief of the Blackfeet. Do I like this life? No. They made me Indian instead of killing me; they gave me a boy name after their custom, and surrounded me with red faces and death arrows. When I saw that escape was impossible, I accepted the situation. I surpassed my comrades in the chase and border foray. By and by my first feathers came, then the armlets of the chief, then the name I bear to-day—Artolah, the white chief of the Blackfeet. Are you convinced now?"

"I am," answered Ivien. "But what shall I call you?"

"Your friend!"

The heart of the captive girl throbbed joyously.

"A thousand thanks. When I heard your voice, I believed that heaven had sent me a friend."

"Believe that still, won't you?" said the boy, as he looked into the trusting face before him. "But how did you come here?"

"It is a long story, and if you will come in I will tell it."

"No. I will crouch here in the deep shadows and listen while you talk. If I entered I might be surprised. Here I can listen and watch."

Ivien saw the boy chief move closer to the wigwam, and the next moment she was pouring her story into his ears.

For a long time Artolah kept his eyes averted from the fair speaker who noted the changes of his countenance as chapter after chapter of her life history fell from her lips; but at last they

turned slowly upon her and watched her till the story came to a close.

The girl avenger kept nothing from her new friend, for she seemed to think that thenceforward their lives were to be linked together in an inseparable bond of union. But she told him of the doings of the mysterious Brotherhood of the Black Cross in New York, how it had murdered her father, and how the hounds of outraged justice had driven the Nine from the metropolis.

Then came the story of the oath of vengeance, and the boy chief as he listened followed Ivien and her sister from the city to the Far West and stood by, as it were, as one after another of the Brotherhood went to their deserved doom.

"And he still lives—the last one—the chief of all?" he said slowly, when Ivien had finished.

"Thus far he has escaped us!" was the reply.

"Where is he?"

"I saw him for the last time when his horse bore Aida from my sight."

"And Aida herself?"

"Alas! I have not seen her since that fatal hour."

"You may be the last hunter," said the boy.

"I pray to Heaven that she lives! I was satisfied when the eighth one met his fate; I would have left Murell Anton to the vengeance of the gods; but Aida, who would not stop, said 'On! on!' and for her sake I followed the trail that led me to this place. You have never seen my sister? The last blow struck by the Black Crosses almost deprived her of reason. Since that night she has known nothing but vengeance. With the pertinacity of the bloodhound, and the unsparing nature of the wolf, she has followed the trail of death. Murell Anton still lived! that was goal enough for her. At times she imbued me with her nature; but I would never make a life-hunter—never!"

The boy chief looked into the fair speaker's eyes; he saw the deep blue orbs swimming in a sea of tears, and his stained hand glided around Ivien's fingers.

"If Murell Anton as you call him still lives, you need not hunt him!" he said. "From this night he has a new foe on his trail! the blow struck in New York shall be avenged in the country of the Blackfeet."

"What mean you?"

"I mean that Artolah, the white chief of the Blackfeet, has stepped upon Gold Trigger's trail."

"He never wronged you!" cried Ivien gazing into the speaker's eyes, flashing now with mad desires. "You have never even seen him—"

"There! He slew one dear to you—he and his men. He would take your life if he found you hunting him in this country. I am on his trail!"

"No, he would not kill me," said Ivien, quickly, and with a flush. "That man always seemed to fancy me."

"Then he came to your house?"

"Oh, yes. But need I say that I repulsed him—I a girl of fourteen? He is a man of strong passions. Methinks his love would take him through a furnace of fire. No, he would not kill me."

The youth understood the girl,

"But Aida?" he asked.

"Murell Anton always hated her—always! Were she in his power, he would not hesitate."

Artolah was about to reply when the rapid discharge of firearms brought him to his feet.

Ivien, too, sprung up.

"Back into the tepee—quick! I will fix the arrow!" he exclaimed. "Those pistols have never cracked in this town before. We will meet again."

With a white face Ivien obeyed, and as the arrow was returned to its place she heard the white chief spring away.

But she could not see him dash through the village, nor hear the startling cry that fell from his lips as he was suddenly brought face to face with Murell Anton and his foes.

An Indian shooting Indians in the midst of the Blackfoot village!

What did it mean?

But the next moment he saw the Sport step forward and bare his bosom to the scarlet tigers and heard his words of defiance.

Then a pistol leaped from the boy chief's belt, and as he started forward again he cried:

"That man is really Murell Anton! I told Ivien that I would avenge her wrongs; I will do so now!"

A minute later the boy brave sprung before the warriors, pistol in hand, and with flashing eyes.

"Hold your arrows, Blackfeet!" he cried. "I'll kill the first one that lets fly a shaft. This life is mine!" and whirling upon the undaunted Sport, he thrust the revolver into his face!

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

"I GUESS I'll stop hyar and diagnose my case. My head's been leakin' like a rotten tub, an' I don't feel as strong ez I did this mornin'. Besides, hyar's a nat'ral lookin'-glass in which I kin contemplate my phiz."

Pandy Roorback jumped from his horse and released the lines which he had held during a rough ride of twelve miles from the spot where he had fallen before the bullet of the man from Panther.

His face, hideously splotched with particles of half-dried gore, rendered him an unhand-some object, so that he started with a cry of astonishment from his reflection in the water of the clear mountain stream over which he had leaned.

"Not ez purty ez a pictur', nor ez fresh ez a peach!" he exclaimed. "They wouldn't take me fur an Apollo, an' my photograph wouldn't sell well in a first-class gallery. But what thar's left ov me is the genuine article; it bears Pandy Roorback's trade-mark. The patent on my existence hezn't expired yet, men ov Panther. We'll meet again at Phillippi, or words to thet effect. By the jumping jingo! it war a close shave, anyhow."

Old Bizness proceeded to bathe his face in the clear, cool stream, and the long streaks of morn-ing that peeped over the eastern horizon enabled him to examine his wound.

The ball had plowed along his right cheek, taking off the merest tip of his sallow ear.

"It's about the closest shave ov my life," he

said; "but I'd rather hev the lead pill whar it is now then hev it keepin' house in my brain. The boss made good time: them fellers have given up the chase, and are trustin' to fate to bring us together again. Fate!" and the old fellow laughed sarcastically. "I'm fate itself, an' I'll see thet we meet again. I'd like to impress this on yer minds, men ov Panther."

The country in which he found himself was not strange to Pandy Roorback. He knew every foot of the Bear River lands, for some of the most exciting adventures of his life had transpired among them.

When he had dressed his wound he remounted his horse and rode leisurely in a southwesterly direction.

"Murell ought to be in the kentry by this time," he said in audible tones. "I'll go down an' stick a notice onto the big sycamore."

The sun was fairly up when the redoubtable hunter reached the scene of Ivien's hanging at the hands of the Panther City avengers, and his eyes dilated when he caught sight of the rope that still dangled from the fatal limb.

"Somebody's been holdin' another picnic," he said. "An', by George! they've posted some kind ov a notice on the tree."

Riding forward he soon drew rein beside the rope, and mastered the writing which, as we have already seen, was addressed to him.

"I didn't expect that the old tree'd be a post-office: but anyhow, Murell, I'm glad to hear from ye. You ain't alone ef thet knife doesn't lie. Mountain Bill ar' with you, an' I'd like to meet thet individual."

The old fellow re-read the notice until he felt that he could repeat it from memory, and then drawing an ugly, rough-handled knife from his bosom, he plunged it through the paper and into the tree alongside of Mountain Bill's blade.

"They kinder look like twins!" he said with a grim twinkle in his eyes, as he drew back and contemplated the two dirks. "Ef Bill war hyar we'd take 'em out an' put 'em somewhar else! Things ar' gettin' interestin' ez well ez close, an' whoever comes out ahead in this contest will hev a mighty small majority. Mebbe it will be a tie."

The rope swinging lazily to and fro in the morning wind next attracted Pandy's attention, and his eyes lit up with victory in a few moments.

"It ar' a sto'e lariat, an' I'll bet my boots thet it war in Panther thirty-six hours ago. The boys hev been hyar; they didn't hang an Injun, er he'd be hyar now; they pulled up somebody ov more importance. Now, who war it? Who? why, one ov them gals, ov course!"

Having settled this problem to his satisfaction, Pandy Roorback let fall the rope which he had been scrutinizing.

"They went off together—Murell and Bill," he said. "Their heads ar' turned toward the Injun kentry; but they stopped on this side the hills. Mebbe I kin find 'em an' bring matters to a crisis."

He galloped from the spot with his sharp eyes fixed on the hoof-prints on the ground.

The end of the hour found Old Bizness still riding north. His face wore a puzzled expression. Whither were the tracks taking him?

Nightfall found him among the hills that separated the Bear River country from Indian-land, and sitting on his well-blown horse among the shadows, he appeared to be trying to penetrate the mysteries of the land that stretched dimly before.

The trail which he struck at the big sycamore had led him to the borders of the Blackfoot land, over which he believed Murell Anton and Mountain Bill had preceded him.

"Wal," he murmured after many minutes of meditation. "I'm not particular whar I meet 'em, but I'd like to know what brought Murell to this p'int. Mebbe he ain't down thar arter all; he's had a big start ov me, an' ef he's alive he may be ridin' back to the B'ar River kentry in s'arch ov me. But while I'm at the door I'll go in an' take a glimpse at the furniture."

The fearless worthy cocked his rifle as he resumed his journey, and the stars saw a horse and his rider gain the foot of the hills, and dash forward as if eager to reach a certain goal.

The present wasn't the old man's first visit to the spot which he was traversing, for when within a few hundred yards of the Indian village, he moved to the left and gradually described a circle in the starlight.

"I'll go it on the bushy side. I'm used to it," fell from his lips as he dismounted and bade his horse lie down among the chaparral at the edge of which he had halted. "They're going to do suthin' in the square, fur I kin hear the greasers carryin' on some kind ov confab. Mebbe they've corraled the man I'm after."

Then the lank figure of Old Bizness began to crawl through the bushes. He got along with great ease, and did not stop until near the furthest edge of the patch which extended almost to the Blackfoot village.

All at once he came to a halt, and a half smothered exclamation of surprise fell from his lips.

"Draw or move an' we'll make a lead mine ov yer head!" said a voice at his elbow, and the hunter turned to look into the dark chamber of a revolver.

"Oh, we're more than one. If you don't believe it just swing yer eyes around."

Old Bizness obeyed, and saw at a glance that he was surrounded by at least a dozen desperate men whose pistols covered his head.

"What brought you hyar, Pandy Roorback? Tell us the truth!" whispered the leader of the gang.

"Thet's a matter ov my own," was the answer. "Parmit me to inquire the meanin' ov them Injun voices over thar?"

"Can you understand Blackfoot lingo?"

"Mebbe so."

The men exchanged glances with their leader, and in the silence that followed Pandy thought that the distance between his head and the revolvers became considerably lessened.

"Listen to me, Pandy Roorback," continued the leader of the circle. "We're all in the jaws ov death. As you kin see, despite the onsartin light, we're a part ov the gang what tumbled you back among the bushes a few hours ago; the rest ar' huntin' you at this minute somewhere among the hills ov B'ar River. We'd all be thar ef a sart'in important diskivery hedn't

brought us hyar. They've been havin' terrible times over thar among the Injuns since we come hyar; but we can't make out more than half ov the confab goin' on now. You can't deceive us; you kin talk an' understand the Blackfoot lingo. Now can't you, Pandy?"

"Yes."

"Good! now open yer ears, but first tell us what brought yer hyar, on pain uv death, mind you!"

The old fellow did not wince.

"I came hyar to kill, mebbe," he said.

"An' we to save! You see our mission ar' more marciful than yourn. Do you know who's over thar with his life hangin' to a spider's thread?"

"Yes; Murell Anton!"

"You've hit the nail on the head, Pandy. The Blackfeet hev corraled the boss Sport uv the West, an' now, so far ez we kin make out, they're speakin' fur an' ag'in' him, the red devils ar'. Now we want you to listen an' translate the lingo fur us."

"In other words you want me to help you save 'im?"

"That's it. If you don't, you'll pass in yer checks whar you ar'. Take your choice, Pandy."

A moment's silence followed the presenting of this fearful alternative.

The sallow face of the long scout seemed to change color, and the next moment, as he compressed his bloodless lips, he sprung erect and thrust his revolver above his head.

"Me help you save Murell Anton?" he demanded. "Do you think that I've lived fifty-four years to play the fool? Men uv Panther, lift a weepin' ag'in' me, an' I'll touch my trigger an' shut the jaws uv neath on every one ov ye. Gentlemen, I've made a rule never to interpret Injun talk fun ennybody, an' ez I kin see better than I kin hear, I'm goin' to take a back seat an' look at the performance goin' on over thar."

The last word was still on the speaker's lips when, with a bound, he leaped over the heads before him and darted straight toward the hum of voices in the Indian town.

Instantly, six or seven forms sprung erect, and it is possible that the daring borderman's career would have ended then and there, if a person had not thrown himself before them.

"No, no, boys!" he cried, pushing down the weapons already leveled at Old Bizness. "Let that devil go for the present. Our shots would betray us, and the Boss over thar would die ez sure ez fate. Curse thet old fiend! We'll hev to change our tactics now."

CHAPTER XV.

WHEN THE CHIEF COMES BACK.

GOLD TRIGGER did not quail when the white chief wheeled upon him and thrust the deadly revolver into his face.

There was about the Sport that devil-may-care spirit which takes possession of so many of his class, and from the fierce faces of the Indians who kept their buffalo-horn bows bent he gazed into the flashing eyes of his new enemy.

"Well, take my life, since you claim it!" he said. "See! my pistols are empty. I am at your mercy. You knew this when you came."

"I did not count your shots," said Artolah, quickly.

"But you counted the red Greasers out there; there's a full dozen of them. I never miss when I handle the gold-triggered boys."

The man's lips closed triumphantly, and with pride behind the last word, and he drew his splendid form to its true height.

The boy hesitated. The man before him was unarmed, helpless; he had but to press the trigger to finish Murell Anton's career.

Aida looking on seemed to have lost all power of articulation; Artolah had burst upon her sight without a moment's notice, and she found herself gazing upon the famous White Chief of the Blackfoot nation.

He was a boy, not a man, tall, strong, and fierce; his figure was without a fault of curve, and there was a real beauty about his face that attracted her even in that perilous hour.

"Oh, end this tragedy!" suddenly broke in the voice of the Sport. "Death may as well ring down the curtain on Murell Anton's life here as elsewhere. And then I'd rather go under by your hand than—"

"No! he is mine!"

It was Aida's voice, and the hand of the excited young girl was on Artolah's arm.

The next moment the eyes of the youthful pair met for the first time.

"Yours?" said the boy. "Who—ah! I know who you are. You are Aida Coress—one of the Death Angels."

"I am one of them; the other, Ivien—"

She paused, for her gaze had encountered the Sport's eyes, which were filled with devouring eagerness.

"She is nearer than you think," said the boy.

"What! Ivien near me at this hour?"

"She is."

"Then more than ever leave that man to my vengeance—no! to ours!" she cried, pointing at Murell Anton. "We will end the life-hunt here. There! lower your pistol. Now, Murell Anton, dare you say that I am not merciful?"

"I say that the lad is a coward!" fell from the Sport's lips. "But I am ready to try conclusions with you, my pretty demoness."

This scene, unexpected by the warriors, had strengthened their hesitation; and at length their bowstrings relaxed; but their eyes still darted baleful light upon the trio.

"You must stand back. I cannot be ruled by your desire for vengeance," the boy chief said to Aida. "I will avenge your wrongs. Murell Anton, prepare!"

Aida found herself thrust aside; the epithet of coward had maddened the boy, and her eyes flashed fire as she whirled upon the Indians.

"Are you blocks?" she cried. "The white chief is going to deprive you of a great enemy. See! his hand is at the trigger."

A wild, tigerish cry fell from savage lips, and the scarlet body that bounded forward sent Artolah to one side with a sweep of a resistless arm.

"If I can not rule I will ruin!" murmured the

girl. "I will play this life tragedy to the bitter end."

The white chief had been thrust aside in no gentle manner, for his foot struck one of Gold Trigger's prostrate victims, and he fell headlong among the stiffening bodies of the slain.

"That was well done!" said the Sport admiringly, and the next moment he found himself in the hands of the braves.

"Girl, go back to lodge—quick!" were the words whispered into Aida's ears as a hand encircled her wrist, and turning she looked into the face of the Blackfoot who had ridden beside her from the place of her capture to the village.

"Back to the lodge and leave my foe alive in your hands?" she ejaculated, drawing back.

"Girl see 'em ag'in, mebbe," said the young brave, and before Aida could reply she was lifted from the ground by main strength and borne away.

Murell Anton, despite the crowd that surrounded him, followed her with his eyes.

Would he ever see her again?

He feared that they would never get to try final conclusions with each other.

As for Artolah, he picked himself up from among the dead and hurried from the spot.

"They are all here," he murmured, "Gold Trigger and his foes! That girl must live on hate alone; she could not love; but the other, Ivien—ah! I must go back and prepare her for the tragedy which is bound to follow the scenes of to-night."

A few minutes later he lay in the deep shadows before the door of Ivien's lodge, and a pale face remained framed by the dingy curtains, while he related the story of his adventures.

"What will happen now?" eagerly asked the girl.

"Gold Trigger's trail will end here," was the prompt reply. "Think of it!—when I reached the spot twelve Indians lay dead before him. Those terrible pistols of his did not miss once."

"'Tis said they never miss."

"I believe it; and such wonderful shooting in uncertain light, too."

The girl was silent for a moment.

"Will they not bring you to account for your interference?" she suddenly asked with much solicitude.

"No! I am not afraid," he said, boldly. "I have some authority here, if my skin is white. I have enemies; we chiefs are never without them, and," with a smile, "I wouldn't give an arrow for a man whose fellow humans were all his friends."

"But Gold Trigger?"

"They will not deal with him until Walking Bear returns; he is the great head chief of the Blackfoot nation. His arrival is hourly looked for. When he comes, and not before then, the end of your life hunt will begin. What will they do with Murell Anton?" he said, taking a question from Ivien's lips. "Ah, need I answer you? They will give him a trial, but it will be a farce. Walking Bear once took a tour eastward, and when he came back he was full of new ideas. Since then he has tried his prisoners, and with such a queer jury, too."

"Indian juries must be prejudiced ones!" Ivien found herself saying.

"It is not an Indian jury," said the boy, smiling. "There is not another jury like it in the whole civilized world. You would start, grow white, and cry, to hear that terrible twelve render its verdict. But I must not tarry here. Do you not hear those cries and shouts of grief and vengeance? The squaws are mourning and tearing their hair over the victims of Gold Trigger's last shots."

Ivien could not but hear, and her beautiful face grew pale while she was forced to listen.

"What if safety were to be offered you?" said Artolah, as he hesitated departing.

Safety? the word made Ivien turn and fix her eyes upon him while her heart seemed to leap into her throat.

"Whence would it come?"

"From the hands of Artolah!" said the boy, stretching forth his hands. "Listen to me: I have a plan, I can save you. But I cannot reveal it now. I will come again. Trust me."

Ivien held forth her hand. "I have no one else to trust," she said, as he grasped it. "Know that I confide in you."

A moment the boy's eyes full of thankfulness rested on Ivien's trustful face, and then he released her hand and dashed away.

Where was Gold Trigger all this time?

If Ivien had inquired concerning his whereabouts while Artolah sat before her lodge, she would have been told that in all probability the strong walls of a wooden building encompassed the western Sport.

The logs of that structure had been dragged from the mountain forest and scarlet hands, and iron-muscled arms, had lifted them to their places.

They surrounded the chief of the Black Cross, and as he paced his dungeon in rapid nervous strides, he brought up suddenly against them more than once.

All at once he stopped.

"That accursed growling never lets up a minute," he said, in no good-natured tone. "The mourning of those Indian women was Bedlam enough; but that din is pandemonium. It isn't far off, either, but it cannot be that bears would come from the mountains and fight so fiercely in the village. Maybe Walking Bear keeps a menagerie."

The noises, undoubtedly produced by a number of bears engaged in more than playful combat, were horrible and deafening, and shut his ears as he might, Gold Trigger could but hear.

Suddenly the hideous cries changed to roars of pain, and the blows of a cudgel were plainly heard by the doomed Sport!

This puzzled him the more, and Aida, Ivien, and his own fate were forgotten as he sprung to the door through which he had been thrust into the prison.

"Hello! guards?" he cried. "I'm kind of curious to know what your chief does with so many bears."

"Dead Shooter find out soon enough!" came the answer, through the crevices. "Him an' bears stand face to face by-'n'-by."

Gold Trigger started back.

"Well," he said, shutting his teeth hard. "I do not know but that I'd sooner be thrown among those terrible brutes than have that girl gain the victory. Courage, Murell Anton! Mountain Bill will avenge you!"

"He will, by the jumpin' jingo!"

The Sport turned like a man struck in the side by an arrow.

The voice seemed to come from the ground at his very feet.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

"BILL!—Bill, I am going to trust everything to you," murmured Gold Trigger, applying his lips to the tiny crevice through which he believed the startling voice had come. "Only be cautious; remember that you have no friends here—that your scalp would be worth its weight in gold to these infernal red wolves. Bill, old pard, Murell Anton is going to live to pay all the debts he owes!"

But no voice replied to the eager man, and, somewhat surprised, he called the name of his pard.

"What means all this?" he suddenly ejaculated, starting back. "Did my ears deceive me? Was not Mountain Bill out there a moment ago? I left him in the Bear River country to watch Pandy Roorback, and now—"

The man stopped and pressed his hand to his forehead.

"I am calm!" he said, a moment afterward, with a faint smile. "My situation is not turning my brain. No! I am not imagining sounds which I did not hear. Mountain Bill was out there. I would stake my life on that. I am going to hope to the last second. I believe that Murell Anton was not born to die by a lot of bears nor to fall before the mad hand of a girl."

We can imagine how the Sport returned to the crack and listened with wildly throbbing heart for a repetition of the voice which had suddenly filled his soul with hope.

He listened and watched, disturbed by the occasional renewal of the wild combat which had once before assailed his ears, until checked by inhuman blows; but Mountain Bill, if he had been so near, did not return to fan into a flame the spark of hope, and the heavy eyes of Gold Trigger saw the harbingers of morning without having once closed.

Bright as the day was, it but illy revealed the interior of his prison; but he saw enough to assure him that single-handed no man could gain the outside.

"What are the fiends waiting for? Why don't they put an end to this drama?" he cried, more than once as the hours passed slowly over his head. "Oh, for ten minutes among them with my gold triggers at my fingers!"

At last, Murell Anton stood at the dungeon door, listening to a tumult which momentarily increased without.

"That means something," he thought. "If I were going to guess, I would say that the head Satan of them all has come back."

He would have guessed correctly, for in the

middle of the square a splendid specimen of the red race sat proudly on the back of a strong horse, listening with flashing eyes and compressed lips to the exciting story that fell from hundreds of tongues at the same time.

A wild, half-crazed crowd of yelling demons, male and female, surged about the plumed savage, whose eyes shot angry glances toward the structure in which Gold Trigger the Sport stood waiting for the end.

At last Walking Bear put an end to the scene. His arm pointed at the hut.

"Bring the white man out!" was his command. "The bears shall judge him in the great square of the Blackfoot town."

Instantly, with yells that seemed to shake the solid earth, the crowd made a rush for the Sport's prison. It was night again, but his keen eyes saw them in the starlight.

"The time has come! Courage, Murell! Game to the last—that is the word!" and he braced himself for the ordeal.

In a moment more the wolves were at the door; the guard attempted to undo the multitudes of rope that fastened it, but their movements were too slow for the impatient crowd, for they were flung aside and the cords, severed by twenty knives, fell apart in the twinkling of an eye.

Then the door, itself a mass of logs, was hurled inward, and the red pack rushed over it and fell upon the victim.

For a moment Gold Trigger apprehended that they were going to rend him piecemeal then and there, and his clinched hand shooting straight out from his shoulder for a moment made an opening in the red ranks; but the yelling fiends returned to the charge and overcame him.

Then it was he discovered that they were but fighting for the honor of conveying the captive to the place of trial, and without further resistance submitted to his fate.

Once beyond the dungeon, he was lifted from the ground and borne forward at full speed, those who could not keep up with his captors yelling like demons in the rear.

It was the wildest moment of the Sport's life, and when he was at last set down, but strongly held by six iron hands, he breathed free once more.

Where was he?

Looking around, he found himself beneath a great tent-like structure, whose supports were tall poles. The roof was composed of skins, and fastened to each support was a resinous torch that gave light to the scene.

Held by the trio of half-naked braves, whose bodies glistened with a profusion of bear's grease, the Sport stood in the center of the Indian court-house. Hundreds of flashing eyes surrounded him, and not a face of pity rewarded his searching look.

Suddenly an unearthly growling saluted his ears, and a murmur of applause went round the circle.

The Sport shut his lips and glanced toward the spot from whence the sound came.

A minute later there stalked into the ring the magnificent figure of the great chief of the Blackfeet, Walking Bear.

He did not deign to notice the Sport, but turned his eyes westward and waited for the bears.

Presently the crowd at a certain part of the circle began to scatter, and amid a Bedlam of growls and snarls, the animals made their appearance.

"Twelve! just a jury!" fell from Gold Trigger's tongue as the cinnamons bounded into the inclosure, each one held by two stalwart Indians.

At a wave of Walking Bear's hand the twelve were halted, and brought face to face with the Sport, their eyes lighting up with ferocious anticipation as they observed him, and their horrid teeth grated as they were displayed for his inspection.

Then while he found himself absorbed in a study of the monsters, Walking Bear whirled upon him and strode forward.

"White man is to be tried by the bears of the mountain!" he announced. "Now let him answer Walking Bear. What brought him into the land of the Blackfeet?"

Gold Trigger sent a look of contempt and defiance at the chief, but did not speak.

"Listen, my sons: the white man shuts his mouth for he is guilty!" loudly cried the chief, turning to the jury, which sent up a growling that a wave of his hand instantly suppressed.

"I am not going to add to this farce," thought Murell Anton. "What brought me here? Ah, Ivien, I hope that you are far away. Where is Mountain Bill, the faithful, now?"

"What! man won't tell?" flashed the Blackfoot judge. "He came to avenge the white warriors who fell before the Blackfeet when they burned the village of his people beyond the hills. He was brave to come alone! Alone he entered among the lodges; but the sleepless eyes of the Indian saw him. They made a ring of arrows about his hiding place, and bade him come out. He came out; but he held death in his hand; he sent twelve brave warriors to beat the long trail before him. What does he say now?"

"Gold Trigger says that you dare not give him back his pistols for two minutes!" was the answer. "The man who tries a brave man by a jury of half-famished bears, is not as good as the mangy dog that he kicks from his lodge. I thought Walking Bear was a chief, not a coward! I thought he led a race of men to battle, not that he was an old woman at the head of a tribe of squaws!"

The chief winced under these stinging words, every one of which he understood.

"My pistols for a second, if you dare!" followed the Sport. "I am here helpless—alone. What is one man against a thousand? Well, if you refuse, play the farce to the end!"

Walking Bear had turned abruptly from the captive; rage, illy-suppressed, quivered every fiber of his frame; he was facing the bears again.

"My sons, you have heard the white liar!" he roared, addressing them. "He has killed your brethren, the Blackfoot chiefs and warriors. What shall be his fate? If he is to die, give the sign."

The words had scarcely left the red speaker's

lips, when with one accord the brutes fell upon their fore-feet and touched their noses to the ground!

A wild yell greeted this action—a yell that flared the lights and shook the roof of the savage court!

"The bears condemn you!" haughtily announced the chief, turning upon Gold Trigger, as the animals rose and looked at their master. "When Walking Bear lifts his hand they will avenge the death of the young chiefs and braves!"

Anton said nothing, and the next moment he was standing alone in the center of the ring, his guards having leaped away to rejoin the spectators.

It was a moment of awful suspense.

"My pistols or Mountain Bill!" welled from the Sport's heart.

Then came the death-signal; the hand of Walking Bear was slowly lifted, and the ropes that held the jury in leash slipped from each shaggy neck.

Gold Trigger braced himself for the hopeless task, and saw the bears start forward.

But at that moment the reports of two rifles, one on each hand, broke the suspense, and the two foremost and most eager brutes stopped in their tracks and fell heavily forward, shot through the head!

"The boys!" broke from the Sport's lips. "Now, Murell Anton, do your part!"

Then it was that a man rushed straight toward the bears, and by a mighty leap carried himself clear over their heads.

Almost at the same moment Walking Bear felt something fall against him.

"This for Gold Trigger, with his compliments!" was hissed into the chief's ear, and the object that fell from the Sport's hand was a stalwart Indian whose brain-pan was shattered, and whose limbs were already stiffening in death.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LIFE-HUNT ENDS.

THE confusion that now reigned in and around the Indian court is simply indescribable.

Murell Anton, after blowing Walking Bear's brains out with the chief's own revolver, turned and cleared a way for himself through the excited crowd that confronted him.

The bears, cheated of their prey, were rushing about, uttering cries of rage, and each moment growing ferocious and desperate.

A crowd of braves had rushed to the chief's side, only to find Walking Bear already dead. He would rally them for the foray nevermore!

Meanwhile, rushing through the village was Gold Trigger. In his right hand he carried the weapon whose barrel was stained with the best blood of Blackfoot veins—a king's.

"I shall meet the boys; the shots that dropped the bears came from each side. They were waiting for the critical moment; but why did they not pour a volley among the brutes? Why—"

The Sport paused with the sentence broken and sprung back from a figure that had stepped without warning into his path.

"Murell! by the jumpin' jingo! Give me yer fist!" said the apparition.

The next second the men stood together; Murell Anton was looking into the face of Mountain Bill.

"I couldn't desert you, pard," he said. "An' then, ef I hed stayed in the B'ar River kentry, I wouldn't hev see'd old Pandy, nohow!"

"Why not, Bill?"

"Because he's hyar."

"Here?"

"Right over thar somewhar. It war him what killed one ov the b'ars. We both happened to shoot at one, an' we didn't see each other, either. But what does he want to save *you* fur?"

Gold Trigger gave a start.

Was Pandy Roorback the fate that was preserving him for the vengeance of that merciless girl?

"But where are the boys?" he asked.

"What boys? I come hyar alone."

"Then alone we must depart. Listen! My God! the mad bears, having sniffed their master's blood, are attacking the Indians indiscriminately. Bill! Bill! now is our time!"

The sounds that were wafted to the friends' ears proclaimed the nature of the wild battle raging in the square. The half-famished bears had rushed upon the vast assembly, and the warriors, knife and hatchet armed, were contending with them for the mastery.

Mountain Bill knew the village well, and led Gold Trigger to the corral. In a few moments two horses were secured.

"Hold the rope a minute," ordered Bill, placing the rein of his steed in Murell's hand, and the Sport saw him dart away and kneel beside a wigwam.

For several moments he watched the crouching figure of his "pard" with feverish curiosity. All at once he saw a flicker of flame below Bill's face.

"Not that!" cried the Sport as he leaped from his steed. "The man shall not seal our doom by such an act," and almost before the last word had left his lips, his hand had fallen heavily on Mountain Bill's shoulder.

"What are you going to do, Bill!" he asked, sternly.

"They hev'n't got light enough to fight by over yonder," was the reply, "I thought I'd give 'em a little more."

"No! put out the sparks."

"But they burned Panther City, pard; they didn't leave a shanty."

"Then fire the town and let them see our trail."

Mountain Bill sprung up and set his foot upon the incipient flame, which was immediately smothered.

"That's so; I forgot us in my desire to avenge Panther. Wal, I'll see 'em later."

Again the men sought the horses, and were soon leaving the village behind; and side by side they rode with their faces turned toward the famous Bear River country.

Neither spoke for many miles, but the rough diamond never took his eyes from the thoughtful face of his pard.

"Bill," said Gold Trigger, so suddenly that the old comrade started with a light exclamation,

"When a man is snatched from the jaws of twelve mad bears, it shows that he has been reserved for some other fate."

"Sart'inly! Ar' we not escapin' now?"

"I don't mean that, Bill."

"Oh, the gal? Why, she's back thar among the Injuns. Murell, you an' me hev. see'd the tigress for the last time."

"No! we are to meet again; I know it; the fate that would save me will bring us face to face once more."

"Mebbe so; but I think not, Murell."

The following instant both horses were halted suddenly, and from the apparition that stood before them, the two men looked into each other's face.

"You were right, Murell; *she is thar!*" said Bill.

Yes, the figure on the horse had a graceful, girlish shape, and whose could it be but Aida's?

The Sport looked without a tremor into the face half-concealed by the rifle which rested on the head of the Indian horse.

"Mountain Bill, give the signal!" came over the weapon. "Of course, you are ready, Murell Anton?"

"I am always ready!"

"Murell, she's got the dead drop on you this time," whispered the pard. "Let me shoot over my hoss's nose!"

"No! my hand is steady, and revenge makes me see her heart. I'll not mis. it, Bill. Give the signal!"

The rough diamond turned to the avenger.

"I'll clap my hands, one—two—three! At the last sound, blaze away!" he shouted.

A minute's silence followed.

Then the rough hands of the giant smote together, and the third clap was drowned by the report of firearms.

Gold Trigger quivered from head to foot; the smoking pistol dropped from his hand, and his face fell toward his partner's!

"Fate saved me for her, Bill," he said, huskily. "The trail we began in New York was bound to end in this manner. Let her go, and as you love me, never harm a hair on the other's head!"

The Sport was now in the pard's arms, and soon he knew that the long and relentless life-hunt had ended.

When he looked at the spot from whence the avenging bullet had started on its mission of death, he saw nothing, and by-and-by he went on, leading at his side a horse that carried a corpse.

Daylight found the strange travelers far beyond the Blackfoot hill; and when Mountain Bill rode alone again it was from a mound in a lovely little valley, at the head of which was a rough board, bearing this inscription:

"HYAR LIES GOLD TRIGGER!

the last of the Nine, an' the boss 'un,

PLANTED BY HIS PARD, BILL."

It was the third night after the last duel that a party of three rode into a sheltered valley and prepared to encamp for the night.

One was a youth whose garments were quite like those of an Indian; his companions were young girls.

They had escaped from the Blackfoot village on the night whose thrilling scenes we have detailed; they had ridden fast and far, and were now beyond the Indian line.

"Sister, I will go no further," said one of the girls, looking up into the fair, anxious face that bent over her. "It is proper that my trail should end in this wild land. The excitement that has kept me up so long has nothing to feed on now; my very veins seem depleted. We have taken vengeance for one night's work. The Brotherhood of the Black Cross has been exterminated. Oh, were there ever such a revenge as mine?"

Let us turn from this scene, but while doing so, we must say that a few miles from her last victim, slept Aida the avenger, in the rosy light of dawn.

And the young couple who rode from the valley did so with hand clasped in hand, and with faces sorrow-marked.

On, on until the flag of the United States fort waved over them; and Artolah the white chief was Harry Ruthven once more!

"Wal, he hezn't been hyar yet—him and Bill, leastwise they hev'n't disturbed the notice."

The speaker was Pandy Roorback, and he stood again beneath the branches of the execution tree. Morpheen had been exchanged for an Indian horse, whose bridle rein lay in his sallow hand while he contemplated the knife-pinned placard to all appearances undisturbed.

"I thought they would break fur this place," he went on. "I hed him foul, but by grammany! I couldn't stand by an' see the b'ars ebaw 'im. Somehow or other I wanted 'im to git out ov that pickle, an' so I plugged the bear jest when Mountain Bill dropped another from the other side ov the squar'. Wal, I wish they'd come an' tend to me now. I'd like to resume the hoss-tradin' bizness; but this other matter ar' rather important."

Old Bizness turned from the tree as a number of rifles cracked, and he heard the thud of bullets against the hard wood of the sycamore.

"Somebody's come!" he remarked; "an' ez they ain't the company I'm expectin', I guess I'll retire."

And "retire" he did, for the next moment the Indian horse darted away like an arrow, and ten rough fellows followed a few lengths behind!

They were the avengers of Panther City!

Did they catch old Pandy? eagerly asks the reader.

We are inclined to think that the Indian horse made the best time, for a few weeks ago a queer-looking character rode a dilapidated specimen of horse-flesh into a far Western town.

The animal bore some resemblance to the redoubtable Morpheen, and from each hip hung a huge placard bearing this inscription:

"THIS ANIMILE FUR SAIL ER TRADE."

THE END.

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